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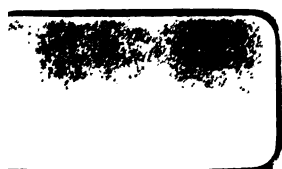
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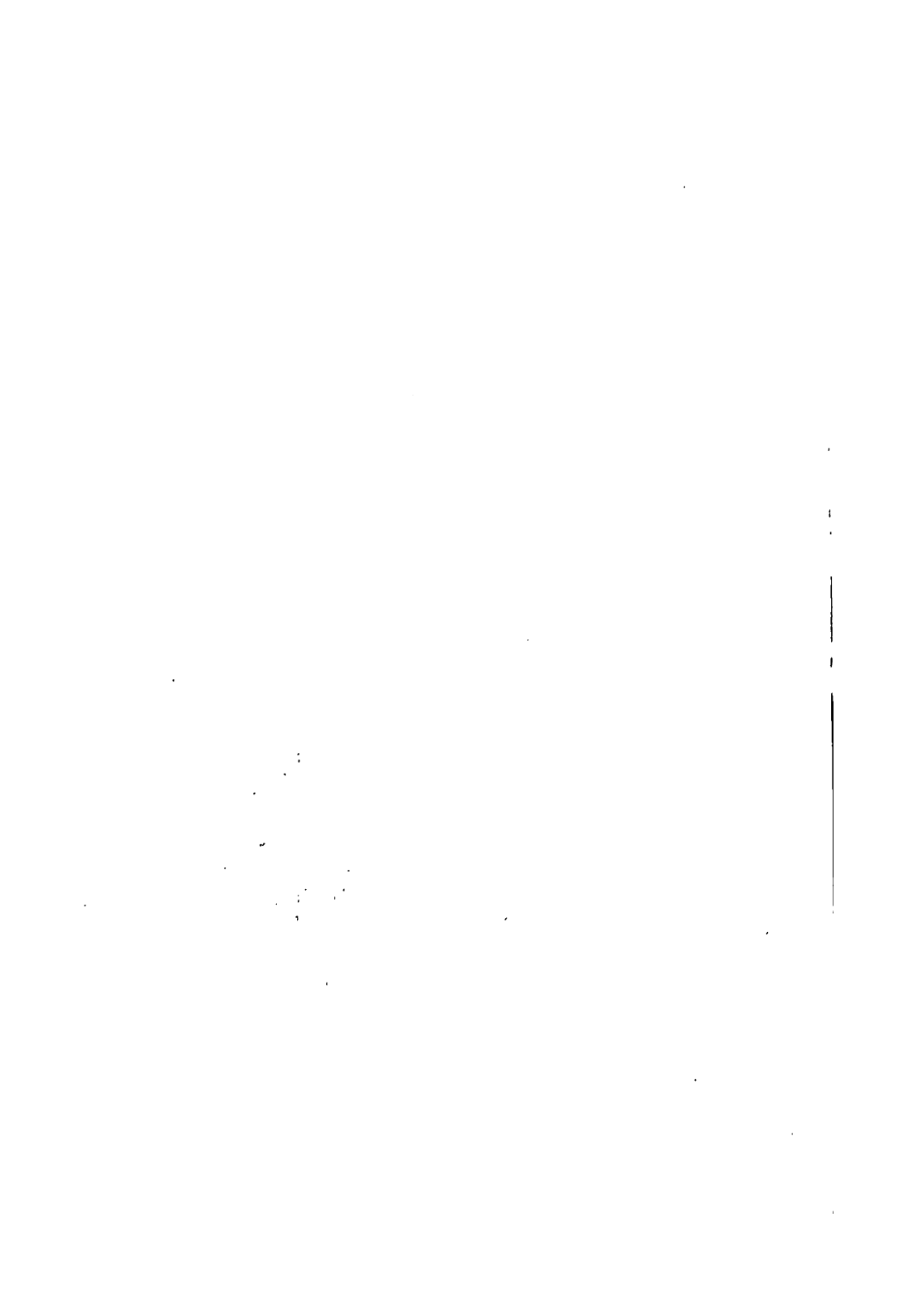
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PATRICIA KEMBALL.

VOL. II.



PATRICIA KEMBALL:

A Nobel.

By E. LYNN LINTON,

AUTHOR OF "LIZZIE LORTON OF GREYRIGG," "THE TRUE HISTORY OF JOSHUA
DAVIDSON," ETC.

"This life
Of error, ignorance, and strife,
Where nothing is, but all things seem."

THREE VOLUMES.—II.



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CHAPTER I.

DEMETER.

THERE is a time in the history of most of us, while young, when the mind takes a sudden awakening and we enter into a new order of thought. We cannot always say how or why this has come about; but sometimes we do know the precise moment when our eyes first opened to the higher truths, and can state how it was that the current of our inner life was changed; we can single out the one from whom we received the ineffaceable impress, and give the pattern of the altar from which we took the living fire that kindled our own. Up to that moment we had been waiting or wandering; after then we knew where our Mecca stood, and set our faces toward it.

Such a moment was coming for Patricia. While her uncle lived she had had no need of extra direction. She had led, as has been said more than

once before, that healthy and unreflecting kind of existence wherein youth grows strongest and loveliest, but wherein is no conscious mental development because no spiritual struggle. She had never known the doubt of conflicting duties, nor suffered the anguish of moral uncertainty; the law under which she had lived had been simple and absolute, and no subtle *Advocatus Diaboli*, skilled in compound ethics, had ever held a brief at Barsanda.

But now at Abbey Holme everything was changed, and her moral standards were fluctuating with the rest. The old and the new had come into collision, and her soul was yearning for an authority outside itself which should settle her difficulties and help her to fashion her life anew; an authority that should show her how to order herself in accord with her present conditions, and yet live nobly after the teaching of her uncle.

If her mind was out of tune, her outward existence was no more harmonious with her real self. Her personal freedom denied threw her time on her hands; and, though she was too strong-minded to allow herself to mope, and too healthy to fall ill even at the unwonted seclusion, the unnatural inaction of her life, both spirits and health were sorely tried. The time thus flung on her hands hung

there so heavily! She could not filter it, hour by hour, in the essentially mindless and frivolous work which filled up Dora's and Mrs. Hamley's days so pleasantly if less than profitably. Indeed, her fingers, rough and hard even yet with the ropes and tar of the *Mermaid*, could not conquer those mysterious ins and outs of shuttles and needles which occupied them as gravely as if the results were of real importance. And she neither admired nor coveted those results when attained. Neither was she an artist by education, whatever she might be by nature. She had no available knowledge of music; and the utmost she could do in the way of what Mr. Hamley called performing on the piano, was to scramble over a simple accompaniment while she sang her ballad songs in a sweet and fresh young voice, as untrained as a Swiss peasant's. Her drawings were a mere school-girl's carefully measured copies of prints and the like, of no technical worth whatsoever, and even favouritism, which was not accorded to her, could not have found them beautiful. And thus it came to pass that Mrs. Hamley had some show of reason in her frequent rebukes administered for idleness—to Patricia, who had so lately been the very embodiment of activity! And when she complained that this uncomfortable niece of hers was

always either doing what she ought not, or doing nothing at all, she was justified by the outsides of things if scarcely by inner realities.

However, as Patricia had sense enough to see that she was very far below the right mark, taking Dora as her standard, she wished to raise herself up to that mark; and, as she had brains, she desired to use them. She wanted to learn something—she was very vague as to what—now that she had time. She wanted to make herself as charming and cultured as Dora—that pretty piece of stamped pewter polished to look like sterling silver; that Hamley model of feminine perfection, held up to her at all times and in all ways as the one to copy and to endeavour to approach as near as might be. So she began to read with the floundering desultoriness of the eager and the untaught; and Mrs. Hamley found more fault than before.

To be sure, Mosheim's "Ecclesiastical History," for example, which was one of the tough pieces of literature the girl undertook of her own motion, was not exactly the best beginning she could have made. It was creditable, but, as Aunt Hamley said, she might have started with something less ponderous and more serviceable for general conversation; some-

thing that would help her to bear her part in society rather more effectively than at present—Tennyson, now, or Longfellow, or even Froude or Macaulay, or anything whatsoever that other people knew or were likely to talk of; but Mosheim's "Ecclesiastical History"—who ever heard of a girl in her teens attacking such a monstrous bit of literature as that! "It was scarcely feminine," said Mrs. Hamley severely; and she was not quite sure that it was altogether proper.

Poor, uneasy, cross-cornered soul! it was not given to her to applaud any one's independent action, least of all Patricia's; and if one stanza chanced to be cut off her Ballad of Burdens another was immediately added, so that the tale of them never lessened.

Had Patricia gone to her for help and advice in her new pursuits, everything would have been smooth. She would have accepted her confession of ignorance and request for instruction as so much tribute to her own superior attainments; for Mrs. Hamley prided herself on her knowledge and her mind; she would have been very careful with her, very pedantic, very hard to please, very thorough; but she would have been gratified. She would have put her to the elements like a little child—probably have given her a page of spelling and a sum in simple

addition ; but she would have liked the child's docility—for Patricia was docile though also independent ; her love of managing would have been gratified ; and she would have seen some of the best points of the girl's character, while some of the worst of her own would have been appeased. A real affection might have sprung up between them over Murray and Hume, and "Auntie, what is the meaning of this ?" — "Auntie, please explain this to me," would have been a continually recurring homage paid to her superiority which would have soothed and flattered her.

But she had checked Patricia too often to make it possible for such a proposition to come from her. Lacking the power of insight into petty humours, taking all things seriously, and too honest for tact or management, the girl had accepted her aunt's moods as permanent dispositions, and had taken to heart the need of effacing herself, as Dora had said. Not in Dora's way of self-effacement, only to make herself the better mirror, the exacter shadow, but by absolute withdrawal from sight and sound ; so that day by day saw her more in her own room upstairs, and more silent when with the family. And both these habits annoyed Mrs. Hamley "beyond expression." As she said bitterly to Dora half-a-

dozen times a day, that girl would kill her before she had done with her !

To which Dora always answered dutifully, " Dear ! I am so sorry for you ! She is trying ! "

Thus Patricia began her task of self-education unguided ; and, as may be imagined, she did not make much headway, but stumbled about among the " hard books " of the library—chiefly dry old history—very much as the men stumbled about the tombs at the foot of the Delectable Mountains.

One day she was in the grounds by herself. It was about a week after the Lowe's dinner party, and Dora was at home. She had caught a little cold on that famous night, and Mr. Hamley had insisted on her keeping the house. He did not wish to see her in the enjoyment of bad health all her life, he had said ; and the sooner she commenced to take care of herself the sooner she would be recovered.

So dear Dora had nothing for it but to smile sweetly and say she would do as he liked, all the while knowing that nothing was the matter with her, that Sydney was expecting to hear from her, and that a letter for him was in her pocket waiting a safe Mercury. Presently, while Patricia was standing on a little eminence in the avenue, facing the strong north-west wind with a kind

of rapturous delight, as if it was an old friend with whom was connected the glad life of the dear past, Dr. and Miss Fletcher passed through the lodge-gates; she coming expressly to see the new girl of whom her brother had reported so pleasantly.

In person they made a decided contrast, and yet they were alike, with that kind of family likeness which depends more on harmony of expression than on similarity of feature or colour. He was tall, angular, serious, lean; with grizzled hair and leathery-brown cheeks; a man who looked as if he might have been a monk in one set of circumstances, or an Arab chief in another. She was tall, too, but stout, smiling, rather short-breathed, and of a generous kind of beauty that had almost an Italian expression in it. For though she was past forty, she was handsome even now, and was of the kind to be handsome to the end. People wondered how it was that Catherine Fletcher had never married; but mothers wondered more how it was that not having married she should understand children and young people as she did, and have such an accurate sense of their needs. They said she was like a mother herself; and asked each other, with amazement, how had she come by it? For there is no error more popular than the

belief that motherhood of itself gives natural insight, save that other—that the maternal instinct is universal.

Miss Fletcher was one of those women who are consecrated by nature to marriage and maternity; and yet her spinsterhood was a greater gain to the world than her marriage would have been. Had she been a wife she would have made one man happy, and she would have been the wise and loving mother of probably many children. But she would have concentrated within the four walls of home the energy and intelligence which now found their larger service in humanity. As it was she was the helper of all who needed; a kind of modern Demeter, with her hands full of gifts and her lap full of babies, offering the grace of her womanhood and the power of her love to the poor and the weak, the lonely and the loveless; a democrat because noble, and pitiful because strong. Her whole being was penetrated through and through with sympathy. Not sympathy of that vague and graceful kind which speaks tenderly of suffering, even sheds tears when it hears of woes and wants, then passes on to its own individual happiness undisturbed; but sympathy which includes active help at the cost of personal sacrifice, sympathy which means patience with folly, patience with ignorance,

with prejudice, with selfishness, with impatience even—the hardest effort of all!—sympathy which cares for the real good of the person concerned, and not for self-expression; and so gets less credit than if it contented itself with talking sweetly of Christian charity, weeping for hypothetical woes, growing indignant at the injustice of society and sorrowful at the misfortunes of men; and in the end saving itself all further trouble by a clever delegation of work and a small money subscription.

“Good morning, Miss Kemball; my sister has come to see you,” said Dr. Fletcher, shaking hands with Patricia; and “Good morning; I am glad to see you,” added Miss Fletcher with her kindly smile and warm grasp.

Patricia’s face brightened. The fresh wind had given her back her strong free look, and the young have instincts of strange accuracy. The same expression came into her eyes as used to be there in old days, when her uncle spoke to her. Something in the voice, the hand-press, the face of her new acquaintance struck a chord that vibrated to her heart, and a light seemed to have suddenly burst forth that turned the grey day into gold.

Her ready responsiveness made the elder woman smile. She liked this bright, tall, handsome girl,

with her frank eyes and unconventional address. She was human and not spoilt, she thought. Her brother had prepared her for a "candid, untutored kind of young person, very transparent and unaffected, but apparently as wild as a hawk;" but she had not expected to see anything so beautiful in person or so innocently affectionate in manner. She had moreover her own reasons lying in the far past for a natural readiness to like the daughter of Reginald Kemball; and as they walked up the avenue together, she improvised an invitation for the two girls for that day, wishing to see more of Patricia than she could see in a visit, and thinking that, as her life at Abbey Holme could not possibly be congenial to her, perhaps she might be of use and help to make it pleasanter.

"Perhaps she might be of use."

This was the law by which Catherine Fletcher lived. This royal kind of woman, this Demeter of modern life, held herself as just the servant of her race, no more, and found in that servanthood her happiness and her honour.

"Yes, I shall be very glad indeed," said Patricia, "if," with a certain hesitancy, "aunt will let me go. I do not think Dora can come; she has a cold, poor girl! so"—very sorrowfully, far more sorrowfully

than the occasion seemed to warrant—"perhaps aunt will not let me go alone."

Miss Fletcher looked at her kindly. She felt all the tyranny and want of liberty included in this probable prohibition to a girl of Patricia's independent look and bearing. And Miss Fletcher disliked tyranny. That was why she had never liked Mrs. Hamley. Much older than herself, she had always remembered her as a tyrant; and she knew that age and prosperity had not widened her borders.

"I hope she will let you go with me," she said.

"I hope so too," Patricia answered gravely. "I should like to go with you."

"We will manage it then; don't be afraid," said Miss Fletcher.

And Patricia found trust in this pleasant-visaged, soft-voiced woman come marvellously easy. She felt as if she had known her a long time ago, and was only taking up an old love, not beginning a new one. She kept wondering to herself "of whom she reminded her;" but she could give no answer, simply because she reminded her of no one, she only wakened up again a former cherished feeling.

"You are very kind, Catherine, I am sure," said

Mrs. Hamley stiffly, when Miss Fletcher proffered her request to take the two girls back to the Hollies, "I am afraid I must say no ; thank you. Miss Drummond is not well enough to leave the house—Dora, my dear, had you not better move over here to the other side of the fireplace?—you are just in a line with the door where you are. There is nothing so bad as a draught."

And Dora, who was already stifling under the shawls and flannels in which Mrs. Hamley had wrapped her, and who had only the most insignificant little head-cold imaginable, pulled her Shetland shawl daintily over her chest, and carried herself and her work-box into the draughtless corner ; making herself supremely uncomfortable with the gentle grace and submissive tact that characterized her.

"I am very sorry for poor Dora, but your niece ? she has no cold, cannot she come?" said Miss Fletcher.

Mrs. Hamley turned to Patricia. Luckily for herself she was looking down. Had she raised her eyes and appealed with them, as she might easily have done, her aunt would naturally, not with intentional ill-nature, but by the mere cross-cornered law of her being, have found some good reason why

not; but as she kept her tell-tale looks to herself, partly for the relief of getting rid of her, and partly because she thought she ought to find pleasure in the society of two elderly people of grave pursuits, albeit tainted with strange heresies—though probably she would be bored to death, when she would appreciate home the more—Mrs. Hamley said yes; and Patricia's sudden flush was so vivid that it set Miss Fletcher wondering why.

She was either very dull at Abbey Holme, as she had imagined, and so hailed any diversion with exaggerated pleasure, or sadly too excitable, she thought. In either case Catherine Fletcher was glad she had asked her—if the former to make her happy for an hour or two, if the latter to give her counsel. For being maternal and direct, she had more love than respect for young people, and treated them all with a certain affectionate familiarity with which they were seldom offended, even when it included unwelcome counsel and maybe rebuke.

"Shall you pass Martin's?" asked Dora, with her lisp rather strongly marked. Martin was the draper whom all right-minded Milltownians patronized.

"Certainly, if we can do anything for you. It will not take us five minutes out of our way," Miss Fletcher answered.

"I am so much obliged to you. I do want some ribbon very much," said Dora. "I will not trouble you, dear Miss Fletcher; Patricia will do it for me—won't you, dear?"

"Of course, with real pleasure; if I can serve you, anything; darling!" was Patricia's hearty answer, all the louder and heartier because she was glad to go with the Fletchers.

"What a dreadful fuss she makes about everything; and how she emphasizes the most trifling action!" thought Mrs. Hamley. "As if there was any necessity for making a profession of faith about a yard of ribbon—answering Dora as if she was her lover!"

"Will you come up-stairs with me, and I will give you the pattern?" asked Dora.

"My dear, throw the shawl over your head, and cover your mouth. I don't like your running about the passages," said Mrs. Hamley. And Dora, with a shy glance of gratitude, smiled as she said, "The house is very warm, dear," and obeyed.

The girls left the room; and, when they were well out of hearing, Dora, flinging the shawl off her head, said with a quick little sob—

"How absurd it is of them to keep me mewed up in the house like this! There is nothing the matter

with me ; and I wish I was going with you ! I am sick to death of this dull drawing-room, and that detestable lace-work and eternal *bézi*que ! ”

To Mr. and Mrs. Hamley themselves she said that evening when they were playing—he scoring a sequence, Mrs. Hamley holding double *bézi*que, and she herself left to the excitement of three queens she could neither marry nor join to a fourth —“ How much I enjoy our dear little evenings, they are so quiet and pleasant ! and I am so fond of *bézi*que ! ”

Then said Patricia, “ Why don’t you say you are not ill, Dora, if you are not ? I would not be kept in the house like this if I were you. You have only got to tell the truth, and say you are all right.”

“ You know nothing about it, Patricia,” Dora answered irritably. “ When Mr. and Mrs. Hamley say you are ill, you are ill ; and nothing but a doctor from London would convince them you are well—and perhaps he would not. As if I did not know them ! ”

“ Then, Dora, if you choose to give way to them like this, you should not complain. There is no good in rowing one way and looking another,” said Patricia gravely.

"Don't talk nonsense!" returned Dora crossly. "I know how I ought to act, and I don't want your advice."

"I did not mean to vex you, dear," said Patricia lovingly. "I only do not like to see you annoyed; and oh, Dora! I cannot bear to see you so dreadfully afraid of Aunt and Mr. Hamley!"

"Better be afraid than bullied," said Dora, a little sulkily. "One must be one or the other here. I take the former, and you prefer the latter; and I don't envy you any more than you envy me. So we need not talk any more about it."

After Dora had found a bit of ribbon for which she desired a match—and, considering that she wanted it so much, it was odd what a long time it took to turn up—she put her hand into her pocket, and, looking at herself in the glass to see if the powder showed too much about her eyebrows, said quite carelessly, "Martin's is close to the post-office; will you post this letter for me, dear?"

"Has the post-bag gone?" asked Patricia, suspecting nothing, but astonished; for the bag never went till six o'clock, and it was only three now.

"I suppose not; but I don't wish it to go in the bag," Dora answered, still brushing off the superfluous powder,

"No? Why not?" was her quick word; and then she stopped and looked at Dora distressed.

"Because I do not want any one to see it," Dora answered. "Now Patricia," turning round from the glass, "do not ask questions. You are my friend, and I trust you. Put that letter in the post for me. Do not look at the envelope, and do not let any one see it. See how I rely on you!" she added with a good imitation of pathos, as she held the girl's hand, into which she had slipped the letter, and looked up with her pretty blue eyes, tenderly, beseechingly.

"I would do anything in the world for you, Dora—you know I would," said poor Patricia with the old conflict in her heart. "But, oh, my dear, my dear, how I hate all this manœuvring and secrecy! Oh, Dora, how I wish you had not a secret in the world!"

"Some day I will tell you what I have, and then you will pity me," said Dora plaintively. "Now I cannot; yet you must help me—blindly."

"It breaks my heart," began Patricia.

"It need not do that," interrupted Dora with the faintest little sarcasm in her voice; "that would be a pity; for the posting of a letter for a friend without telling any one about it is scarcely worth the

fracture of such a heart as yours. Now don't be a goose, darling," she said, changing her manner to a caressing banter that was infinitely becoming, and which was one of her weapons of conquest over Patricia. "There is nothing so dreadful in posting a letter, and it is only the tremendous"—she was going to say tyranny, but, having recovered from her momentary attack of discontented candour, she stopped herself and substituted "care—which Mr. and Mrs. Hamley, dear people, think it right to take of me, that obliges me to do things secretly."

"But I would not be obliged, Dora," said Patricia, returning to her old charge. "I would either obey them loyally or defy them openly. I would not condescend, if I were you, to all this underhand work. I would have more courage, more self-respect!"

"All very well, Miss Patricia, but we shall see you with your little plots and plans before we have done with you."

"Never, Dora! never while I live!"

Dora smiled. "And your letter from Miss Biggs?"

"Ah! that is cruel, Dora!" She turned away.

"Well, it does sound ungrateful, does it not? But all I meant to show, dear, was, that if I had

secrets for one reason, you could be brought to have them for another. Say that it was to please me and not to get any good for yourself, still it was a secret all the same; was it not?"

"Yes; and I must have no more," said Patricia.

"Oh! that is not at all the right view to take," laughed Dora. "You have to put this letter in the post for me."

"No, Dora." She laid it on the table with the directed side underneath.

"Yes, Patricia, if I ask you," said Dora in the most caressing, the most enchanting way.

She shook her head.

"Now look here, Patricia," said Dora, speaking in a quiet argumentative way, not usual to her. "I just want to show you a little of yourself to yourself. When I first asked you to do this for me, you hesitated; when I pressed you, you consented; Then I hurt your pride, you refused. I like consistency, I must say!"

"It was not because you hurt my pride, Dora."

Dora shrugged her shoulders. "Prove it, then."

"No; it is because I hate having to do with secrets. They degrade one's very soul."

"Yes, that is just what I say; your own soul, always your own miserable little soul, and your poor

friend's soul and body both may go to destruction for what you care! You say you love me, and I have tried my very best to make your life here happy, and to stand between you and Mrs. Hamley; and yet you are not brave or unselfish enough to do such a little thing for me as post a letter without proclaiming it on the housetop!" She turned away petulantly and began to cry.

The strong heart went down before her tears.

"Don't cry, Dora," said Patricia, taking her in her arms. "Don't cry, darling! I will do what you asked me—I will do anything you ask me!"

"Post that letter for me?" sobbed Dora with her back turned.

"Yes, dear; post that letter for you."

"And not let the Fletchers see it?"

"No; I will put it in myself."

"You are a darling," said Dora, drying her eyes with dispatch. "I thought you could not be such a cruel, cold-hearted thing as to make me so unhappy."

"I cannot make you unhappy, Dora," said Patricia fervently; "I love you too much."

Dora stood up on tiptoe and kissed her; but the kiss did not altogether soothe the poor girl. The glory seemed to have gone out of her day somehow,

and the cold grey, characteristic of Abbey Holme, to have come back again. Had she been asked she would have rather given up the Fletchers altogether than have undertaken this surreptitious posting; which after all was only a symbol. But things had to go on now as they had begun, and she must carry her sorrowful heart and changed grace to as good a conclusion as might be. So the girls went back into the drawing-room, and Mrs. Hamley scolded them for the long time they had been up-stairs.

When the trio prepared to set out, the lady of Abbey Holme wished them all a stiff farewell, arranging to send for Patricia at half-past nine precisely; and Mrs. Hamley's fractions meant fixed quantities, not floating margins of elastic dimensions.

"I shall expect you home at a quarter to ten," she said with a severe glance at the clock, as if administering the oath of witness. "You must be ready when the carriage calls for you, Patricia, and do not keep the horses waiting this cold weather. It is quite cruel to take them out in such nights!" as if personally injured.

"Shall I walk home, aunt?" suggested Patricia, ever ready with her remedy.

"Don't be silly," was the rejoinder.

"And do not forget my commission, please," said Dora with her coaxing smile.

"No, dear," said Patricia with embarrassment.

And Miss Fletcher, who had the faculty of observation, caught the difference in her tone as well as in her face, and remembered it.

When they got to the town, Patricia first matched Dora's ribbon with a maddening exactness as to width and shade—though the little lady wanted no ribbon at all, save as an excuse—and then saying, "I must go to the post-office, please," put her hand into her pocket and looked disturbed.

"Have you a letter to post? Give it to Henry; he will do it for you," said Miss Fletcher.

"Yes, give it to me," said Dr. Fletcher.

"Thank you. I must post it myself," answered Patricia, her disturbance deepening.

"I am safe, I assure you. I will not drop it," he laughed, holding out his hand.

"Thank you very much, but I promised to do it myself," she answered eagerly; and then she crimsoned with the sudden consciousness that in her very honesty she had committed an indiscretion, and for the sake of more effectual hiding had betrayed more than she ought.

All of which Miss Fletcher noted with those quiet

brown eyes of hers, which had the trick of seeing everything without seeming to notice anything ; casting up one of those sums in moral arithmetic by which she deduced meanings from actions—the product generally coming right. She drew the conclusion now that Patricia was being used somehow by Dora ; and in the course of the walk she spoke with earnestness of the moral deterioration sure to result from manœuvring and secrecy, and the obligation laid on us not to mix ourselves up in matters where we can do no good and might get harm.

“But if we *can* do good?” asked Patricia earnestly.

“Then the question would resolve itself into one of comparative values,” said Miss Fletcher. “But it would be only some most important good for others that could reconcile me to any line of action that was not essentially candid and straightforward.”

Patricia sighed. Then she looked into her new friend’s face, her own kindling :

“It does me good to hear you speak,” she said, sliding her hand under her arm. “It is like dear uncle speaking through your voice. May I come to you when I am in doubt what is the right thing to do?”

“Surely, dear child !” said Catherine warmly. “I can understand that, with all sincerity of liking

and respect for your aunt, you do not find it possible always to ask her advice on all subjects."

"No, I do not," she answered. "She is so different from dearest uncle, and I feel so out of place somehow among them. I cannot tell at times what I ought to do, and I have no one to advise me."

"Make me your mother confessor, and perhaps I can help you," said Catherine, pressing her hand kindly against her warm, comfortable side; and Patricia thought to herself, "If I had known my own mother, I should have felt for her as I feel for Miss Fletcher."

"I want you to look on this as a kind of outside home, and on us as your unregistered relations," said Catherine. "We have known your family so long that you do not come to us as a stranger, and both Henry and myself are prepared to take you to our hearts. Do you hear? You are to come to us in your troubles, and give us your confidence and love. We will help you with our advice, child; and love always does good—both to those who give and those who receive."

She said this just as they reached the Hollies' gate. It was a good omen for the disturbed young soul, needing enlightenment and the living warmth of friendly direction as it did!

CHAPTER II.

BY PRINCIPLE.

THE Fletchers were people with principles and ideas of which they did not only talk, but by which they lived. It was not enough for them to eat, drink, and be decorously merry; to pay their tithes and taxes as gentlefolks should; to keep to the broad way of elemental morality; to do little acts of charity out of their accumulated balance, by which they sacrificed nothing they desired to possess, but, under the idea that they had, counting off all their possible purchases as so many offerings cast into the treasury of the Lord; but they were people who had taken to themselves the great law of duty, and who had set out to live up to their ideal.

They went to first principles and did not give much weight to expediency. They did not believe that because things are they must therefore be

upheld, and they were not afraid of the right even if iconoclastic and subversive. To be sure they knew that it is always troublesome, and at times personally damaging, to maintain the right of God in the face of the wrong of society; but they thought life meant ever trouble in some shape or other, especially in the difficulties which beset endeavour, and they deferred their lotus-eating to another sphere.

The great facts cherished by them were, 'the honour due to humanity irrespective of social condition, and the duty of the strong to help the weak. Hence their own lives were organised on a plan of almost patriarchal simplicity of manners and habits, and they dedicated more than the prescribed tenth to their poorer brethren. They were laughed at of course, and sometimes more than laughed at; Milltown was not the kind of place where they were likely to find sympathisers; but they took their own way as tranquilly and steadfastly as if society had crowned them with roses, not thorns, and right for right's sake was a law good enough for them by which to live.

Yet they were very different each from the other, for all their sympathy and harmony of views and circumstance. Woman-like, she had the more ar-

bitrary singleness of logic in her feelings, and carried out her views to their ultimate where he discerned an opposing law. She had more passion in her love for those she admired; but then she brought the same warmth of nature into her dislikes. He, a man without much weakness of soul or flesh, was therefore possessed of a certain philosophical pity for frailty of all kinds, which never grew to anger save when the question of wrongdoing was one of oppression; and then he was implacable. But as a rule he took things more quietly than she did; striving to get to the roots of a man's action, searching for the physiological causes, the influencing circumstances, where others, and she too at times, condemned only the fact. This made him eminently just. Not the justice which means legality, retributive punishment, and the like; but the ability to see all round a question, and to decide on it according to its rootwork and surroundings. Thus no one could count on him as a partisan, irrespective of justice; by which it came about that he had the knack of offending all sides in turn because he would not be unfair to any. The popular verdict on this brother and sister was, that he was the more mischievous of the two, and she the more foolish.

They were both hard students, and knew many things outside the ordinary grooves of education. The one luxury they allowed themselves in their simply-appointed home was the luxury of books and scientific appliances. They had a powerful microscope and a noble telescope, which last they had fitted up in a rude but efficient observatory that excited more ridicule than admiration by its cunning contrivances of little cost. The subject, too, met with as little sympathy as the method by which it was followed. People said with a sneer they supposed the learned doctor was devising a new system of astronomy which was to upset the Newtonian; and because he busied himself with certain biological experiments, which included boiled flasks, infused hay, and a cloud of moving creatures as the result, they asked him if the old axiom "*ex nihilo nihil fit*" was all a mistake, and was dead matter God?

All these studies were taken to be a kind of flying in the face of Providence; and when, tempted by the desire to let a little light in upon those brains which seemed to him to cherish their darkness too fondly, he suffered himself to mention any facts bearing on the great scientific questions of the day, the after-summary was invariably set in the one unchanging key—the doctor was an infidel, and

his conversation was absolutely impious. Add to this, essentially "radical" political doctrines, of which the Milltown translation was that he and his sister were "known to be socialists; red republicans of the deepest dye; wanting an equal division of property, and desirous of pulling down king, lords, and commons to the one muddy level of unwashed ruffianism," and it may be imagined that for people who valued truth they had sometimes rather a hard time of it.

Strange to say, with all this they were not entirely approved of by the class they upheld, and not personally unpopular with the class they offended. The peasantry and little people in country places like to feel the gentry far above them. They do not care to be caught up into the empyrean of an equal humanity, but enjoy the poetry of their self-abasement in the belief that their superiors are indeed their betters. They think that those who treat them with respect lower themselves to their own level, and would rather their gods came about them awful and effulgent, carrying their lightning in their hands and their crowns about their brows, than as simple men and women benign and unarmed. They liked the good things which came to them from the

Demeter of the Hollies; and the women, when in personal trouble of sickness, sorrow, or dire necessity, turned instinctively to her as possessed of all knowledge and all healing power; but in daily matters they would rather not have been made to sit in her presence; they were bothered by her advice as to the management of their children; her recipes for cooking puzzled them; and the way in which she opened windows and doors in cases of fever and the like seemed to them barbarous and downright heathenish, as well as murderous.

So, too, her insisting on cleanliness and fresh air in her tenants more than compensated for the low rent at which Miss Fletcher's cottages were let; and their undeniable superiority in wholesomeness was paid for, they thought, by the greater extent of surface there was to keep clean, and the fidfads, called improvements, which were not wanted and seldom properly managed.

All of which she and her brother knew well enough. But when twitted with the old simile of the pearls and the swine by those who held to class degradation as the righteous ordering of society, and who thought that class ignorance is and should be irremovable in the lower for the greater convenience of the higher, they used to

answer quietly: "The less such things as we have grown to consider the first necessities of decent living are appreciated by our poorer brothers, the more pressing our duty of educating them up to that point of appreciation."

But the doctrine did not take.

The Fletchers got the lash on all sides. If a man was too poor to send his children to school and they paid for him, as they were sure to do, his neighbours, just able with hard pinching to pay for theirs, railed at the cunning which knew how to get the length of grand folks' feet for the one part, and at the simpleness which let that length be got at for the other; while the Milltown gentry, who to a man disliked the scheme of educating the poor, denounced "those Fletcher fools" as playing the very mischief with class usefulness and parental responsibility. If, they said, a man brings children into the world for whom he cannot provide, he must suffer for it through them; and to assist him by assisting his little ones was to go against the laws of God himself.

When winter came, and with it supplies of food and clothes and firing from the Hollies as surely as the frost and snow, those whose alpha of political economy was that the weaker must go to the wall

in the press and suffer that the strong may be made glad, and whose omega was the sin of charity, declared that the place was becoming revolutionary by his wickedness and pauperized by her folly, and that soon every gentleman would have to make himself a beggar that the beggars might be gentlemen. When they bought up small tenements and lowered the rents, such men as Colonel Lowe, whose tumble-down hovels stood at a rack-rent, said they ought to be prosecuted for interfering with market values; and when they lent money to small landowners, to prevent the necessity of selling their little farms and fields, Mr. Hamley, who had the land-hunger on him, had been heard to say with an oath that this tampering with the natural flow of capital and land ought to be made as actionable as the lowered rents, and that some day "Yon hound Fletcher would find himself in the wrong box, and the Lord make it hot for him!"

No Milltown lady would take a servant from the Hollies. To be sure there were not many opportunities, for the place was good and sometimes the maids were wise. But sometimes they were not, and preferred change for the sake of change to the loving home they had found under Miss Fletcher. And then their chances in Milltown were but

slender. The ladies said they were spoilt by over-indulgence, and were good for nothing after they had passed through Miss Fletcher's hands. Even the labourers who worked for them at odd times had difficulty in finding jobs on the off-days; employers disliking the contrast between the wages given at the Hollies and those prescribed by the labour-market, and resenting the surplusage as a wrong done to themselves who did not choose to give so much. This too was counted to the Fletchers for unrighteousness; and because they were the friends of the poor they were held to be the enemies of the rich, and condemned as undermining the rights of capital in proportion as they recognised the rights of labour.

But, haunted by that odd resolve of theirs to do the absolute right as between man and man, seeing everywhere Humanity and nowhere social arrangements, they cared for none of the hard names wherewith they were assailed. When society was unjust, they stepped in with their reconciling measures, and they found their reward in the worth of the things they did, not in the euphony of the verdict with which the world received them. They lived neither for praise nor for thanks, but for humanity and the right; but they had to bear

their cross in return, this being just the line to which society is ever most fiercely inimical.

These, then, were Patricia Kemball's new friends, and the as yet unknown sphere of thought and feeling into which she was to be introduced.

When the door was opened and they went in, the girl was struck by the house as different from anything she had ever seen before. Her old home at Barsands had been bare and rugged, scrupulously clean, but as plain as the old *Holdfast* itself. Abbey Holme was rich with gold and crimson, elaborate ornamentation, large tracts of mirror, huge vases of modern French porcelain, papier-mâché chairs and tables, and a great deal of bright steel, cut glass, and showy pictures; it was filled with size and glitter rather than beauty; a house of first-class upholstery, resplendent in its way, but that way one wherein both art and harmony were made subservient to expense; and it was singularly un-homelike, and, though monotonous, destitute of all which gives the sensation of comfort or rest. The Hollies was simple, but strangely quaint and beautiful; for beauty was part of the Fletchers' religion of life: only it was beauty that did not with them necessarily include costliness. The materials were everywhere inexpensive, but the colours were pure

and harmonious. The ornaments were few, but of good design and workmanship; books made up much of the wall-furniture; and, though it was winter, flowers and growing plants were in pots and hanging-baskets about the windows. There was evidently a central idea in the arrangements of the various rooms and passages. Incongruous things were not massed together without regard to epoch, style, intention, as is the rule with most houses; but each thing seemed to fall naturally in the place where it was put, and if aught had been removed the rest would have been imperfect. And yet, with all this artistic exactness of arrangement, the house had the free possibilities of homeliness and comfort. The tables were for use, not show; and with rooms not half the size of those at Abbey Holme there was more than double the space available.

The effect of the whole was old-fashioned and un-English. This last was due partly to the wooden structural chimney-pieces, built up with shelves and pigeon-holes for bits of old china, where the looking-glass belonging was set deep in the shadow, lightening what else would have been a dark space, but not obtrusive as a universal reflector; partly to the tiled, square fire-places, and the bold Italian

dogs; to the waxed oaken floors, and squares of carpet and loose rugs in place of the conventional Brussels; to a large amount of dark simply carved wood in one room, and of plain deal, squared, and painted by Miss Fletcher's own hand, in another; to lines of quaint blue pottery; and a general background of flat grey, variously tinted and patterned, against which the bits of rich colour and gold came out with gorgeous yet subdued strength. It was a house of so much evident plan and design that a guiding principle of life seemed the fitting ethical outcome.

The manners too, at the Hollies, were as different from the ordinary manners of society as all the rest. When the maid opened the door—no man was kept save for the garden work and to do the rougher jobs of the house—Miss Fletcher smiled to her a friendly greeting, and the girl looked back one as friendly. She was a pretty young person and nicely dressed, without the "flag," and ladylike because happy and refined; and she gave the impression of having supplemented her servanthood with a fine kind of human affectionateness, and of having added self-respect to her code of duty. But she was a girl whom no one in Milltown save Catherine Fletcher would have taken into service at all; a

mother and no wife, and drifting fast into ruin, when the bountiful Demeter caught her up in her strong hands and cherished her back to happiness and virtue.

"My dear," said Miss Fletcher kindly, "when you lay the table will you set a place for Miss Kemball?"

The girl looked at the young visitor pleasantly. Her manner meant a welcome.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, and helped her off with her goloshes, as her daughter might; not servilely, but with friendliness.

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Fletcher; and the girl, gathering up the things, smiled again and said—

"I hope you have taken no cold this blustering day. Shall I bring you a cup of tea?—and the young lady?"

"Well, do so, Mary Anne; it will be refreshing," was the answer.

"If you will take your things off now it will be ready for you when you come down," said Mary Anne; "and there is a good fire for you in the drawing-room."

"Thanks," said Miss Fletcher; "we will."

Patricia stared. In her old life she had been

kind enough to the servants at the cottage, but she had always been the mistress in her own way. She had perhaps imbibed a certain sense of discipline from the captain, and she had thought it her duty to keep them up to the mark, and to see that they did not waste, nor gad about, nor slight their work, nor fail in daily godliness of service. For even Patricia had her share, if comparatively a small one, of the hardness characteristic of virtuous youth. At Abbey Holme the servants were spoken to as if they were intelligent dogs who could understand what was said to them, but of whose sensibilities or self-respect no one need take account; or, if as men, then men eternally in disgrace, with the master and mistress resentful and displeased. Mr. Hamley's manners, always dictatorial, were at times brutal; Mrs. Hamley's were glacial, as if she had been quite recently annoyed; and no one asked, but all commanded service, for which they never returned thanks. But Catherine Fletcher smiled at her maid and spoke kindly, and said "My dear" as to a young girl of her own rank; giving her order in the form of a request; seemingly too secure of her dignity to be afraid of lowering it by the practical confession of human equality. She

saw Patricia's look of astonishment, and as they went into her dressing-room, she said laughing, "You were surprised at my calling Mary Anne 'my dear?'"

"Yes," said Patricia frankly. "I have never heard a mistress call her servant 'dear' before, and it sounded odd. But I like it," she added.

"Do you? It is one of my ways, as the people here say; and I always see when it startles."

"But do not the servants take advantage of it, and become impertinent?" asked Patricia.

"Sometimes; not often. And if they do, what then?"

Patricia looked straight into Miss Fletcher's face. "You turn them away, of course," she said.

"No, I do not; I keep them, and try to teach them better," answered the lady; and this time Patricia turned her eyes to the fire and looked perplexed. Keep a servant who had been impertinent! It was a strange doctrine, and it puzzled her.

"Why should I not keep them and try to teach them better?" Miss Fletcher continued. "Think of the difference between us. I am a middle-aged woman, old enough to be their mother, with a better education than they have had; with more

experience, more thought ; and consequently I ought to have more wisdom and self-control, which is part of wisdom. Do you not think it would be a shame in me if I had not patience with these young creatures, so much more ignorant and undisciplined than myself ? ”

“ Yes, put that way, you are right,” said Patricia : “ but—— ” she hesitated.

“ But, you would say, they are servants, born to obey and take what they can get from their superiors ; and that this kind of personal consideration is against the laws of society. I grant it. But, on my side, I say that the way in which mistresses, good women in their own spheres, allow themselves to treat their servants, is one of the authorised sins of society : so you see, my dear, between an authorised sin and my own conscience I choose the latter. And I think I am right.”

“ But what should we do if servants were made equal to ourselves ? ” said Patricia ; “ we should have to do our own work.”

“ Which I do not regard as a terrible hardship, were it to be even so,” exclaimed Miss Fletcher ; “ but it would not be as you say. We should always have servants, that is, helpers ; but we should have a higher class—sisters, not slaves ;

equals whom we should be bound to treat with respect and consideration, and who would do their duties from a higher stand-point than that which they hold now. This habit of disrespect towards servants, which we allow ourselves, does us as much harm as it does them. The greatest curse of slavery lies with the owners, not the owned."

"I wish I was like you," said Patricia impulsively.

"I hope you will be far better," answered her new friend, patting her shoulder kindly. "But come down-stairs; I must not make you as sad a democrat as I am myself," she added with a pleasant abruptness; "so let us go down. If we stay much longer, Mary Anne's tea will be cold, and she will feel that she has given her labour in vain; always a disheartening thing for a worker."

The conversation during the evening drifted, not without intention, on Patricia's life at Abbey Holme. As there was nothing to be ashamed of in it there was nothing to conceal. Not that the girl entered into details. The great sorrow of her life, how to reconcile humility and truth, and that other grief, how to reconcile love with disapprobation, she left unnoted; her friendship

was too new yet for full confidence. But the Fletchers felt instinctively how sad it all was for her, and how difficult to remedy. In this house of emphatic rule and suppression here was a young creature entirely without guidance, and in all the dangers attendant on spiritual loneliness. Her energies, cramped on the one side, were wasted on the other; her thoughts, becoming active and importunate, were without a centre or an object; her self-education was necessarily fragmentary and incomplete, and there was no one to help her spiritually, intellectually, or morally. If only they might be of use to her—this fine-natured, noble girl, so lost and lonesome now! Yet how could they help her? They knew Mrs. Hamley's jealousy too well to hope that she would give Patricia into any one's hands; while they, specially tainted in her sight with various moral heresies, of which that same servant question was not the least, were less likely to win her than any other.

Still, if they might have her with them often, they knew they could do much for her. They could teach her how to think as well as what to learn; they could open to her the marvels of science and the treasures of literature; they could take her to nature for her joy and to humanity for her

duties. Knowledge and love, knowledge and good work, knowledge and living out of herself for the benefit of others; yes, the Fletchers knew clearly enough that they could help Reginald Kemball's daughter, and place her in the light if they were allowed. And it pained them both to feel that perhaps this bright, young, ardent soul would be atrophied in the sandy desert of conventional inaction, or stifled in the vapour-bath of luxury and the world, while they who might have led it up to greatness and delight were forbidden.

However, they made the effort. In a few days after this Miss Fletcher wrote up to Mrs. Hamley asking her permission to read German with Patricia. It would be a pleasure to her, and would help the girl, who was anxious to learn the language; with pleasant little personal words that were not without their due value. And Mrs. Hamley, because she was angry and discontented with her niece, consented; with the feeling of abandoning Patricia to her own devices, casting her off and cutting her out of the inheritance of love. So Patricia began to read German with Catherine Fletcher, and to have "half-hours with the microscope" with the doctor. And when the lessons were done she went with her new friend into the cottages of the poor, where

she saw life as it is without gloss or varnish, and as she had seen it at Barsands.

This bold, strong contact with reality did her good. It strengthened her for the better carrying of her own cross to see the pathetic patience with which the poor bear theirs; and in thinking much of them she forgot to weary herself in trying to find out the cause of her aunt's tempers and her own shortcomings. But when Mrs. Hamley found that her niece "went about with Catherine Fletcher," as she phrased it, she interposed, and forbade "anything of the kind." Patricia would be bringing home some horrid disease, she said, or something almost worse than disease. She would not have her made "as common" as Catherine Fletcher: she, Patricia, was quite enough inclined as it was to be vulgar and democratic, and everything else undesirable. If she went down to the Hollies—though why she should go at all was a mystery unaccountable to plain people—she must promise not to go into any cottage whatsoever. Such absurdity! What good could she do? and what did she want with dirty children and coarse women? She was far better at home among ladies and gentlemen. And so on. These being the texts on which Mrs. Hamley preached her sermons of

reprobation whenever her niece visited her father's old friends.

By degrees, however, she broke up the girl's pleasant intercourse with the Hollies. The German lessons went the way of the cottage-visiting, and though the Fletchers often asked for her, permission to accept their invitations became daily scarcer, and when granted, drew down on her deeper displeasure.

Still Patricia had their counsel when she needed it. She was to do the right thing ; there was never any doubt on that score. She was to be patient and to avoid all causes of offence ; but when the choice between right and wrong, truth and fair seeming, shameful obedience or noble dissent, came before her, she was to hold by the higher law ; and if she had to suffer because of her choice—well ! she must suffer, and bear her sorrow bravely.

By principle. There was no tampering with that precept with them. But then it is not always the best thing, they said, to speak all that is in one's mind at all times. The gold of silence has its value ; and youth must learn to bear much that is unpleasant with shut lips, patience, and forbearance to oppose. They too counselled self-suppression as Dora had done, but from another stand-point. What was expediency with her was heroism with them :

and under their direction Patricia, though not changing a hair's breadth in her truth and honesty, learnt so much of the wisdom of silence and the generosity of non-condemnation as to become noticeably less prone to testify, and with fewer angularities of virtue.

Mrs. Hamley said she had grown indifferent and unaffectionate; a state, however, she preferred to her former uncomfortable activity, though preference did not include approbation. But in truth Patricia was unable to please her aunt—she was out of harmony with the central point of the girl's character, and no method of life or action radiating therefrom seemed to be beautiful or fitting.

CHAPTER III.

LONG FIELD FARM.

THE country about Milltown had been originally noted for its large number of small holdings, in the days when the backbone of English manliness and liberty was supposed to exist in her yeomanry and peasant proprietors. In those days small farmers had possessed the greater part of the land ; the abbey lands which had been assigned by Henry VIII. at the dissolution of the monasteries, to the Lord Bareacres of the period, having been gradually disposed of by the descendants of that famous nobleman, field by field and farm by farm, till the greater part had, as has been said, been parcelled out into small tenements. The nucleus, however, had been always held together, for the final purpose of coming into the possession of Jabez Hamley, Ledbury's successful office-boy.

The progress of events had gradually changed

the land-holding character of Milltown, and a new order of gentlemen owners had dispossessed the old. The change began about ninety years ago, after the great continental wars had enriched certain army contractors, and when the pagoda-tree was a shrub still worth shaking in India; and it had gone on ever since, till now only one or two of the original peasant proprietors remained in possession. And these clung tenaciously to their holdings, and resisted all the temptation of long prices and money down which the rich men of the place, and notably Mr. Hamley, offered to get them out.

No one, indeed, offered such advantageous terms for fancy-bits as did the owner of Abbey Holme. His land-hunger was the fever of a devouring greed, and never sated. It was a grief to him when a rood of ground was bought by any one but himself, and he held himself personally aggrieved for the loss. But he never confessed that he had been balked, and you could only judge of his mortification by the way in which he depreciated the value of the farm he had missed, and his loud asseverations that the concluding purchaser had given thrice its proper value, and that he would not have had it for half that sum. His schemes were always active. He had corners full fifteen miles off; wedges that he had

inserted in his neighbours' estates with the hope of driving them home to his own park gates ; and bit by bit he was creeping round the local map, colouring it so frequently with the Hamley crimson till now the very Quest itself had not such a large tract surrounding it as Abbey Holme. The brewer against the earl ; and the brewer had the best of it.

Perhaps even a greater grief than the occasional loss of a field or a spinney he desired to add to his estate, was the fact that he had no children to carry on his name and inherit his property. Man-like, the idea of founding a family was sweet to him ; and now that he had obtained and won other things he wanted, his wishes went all the more strongly in this direction. Sometimes he reflected for his comfort that he was only forty-nine years of age all told ; that Mrs. Hamley was twenty years his senior ; and that Providence was often merciful, and removed to a better world elderly women who had begun to get nuisances in this. What ulterior objects he might have, should fate be kind enough to kill Mrs. Hamley, he never told to living soul. It was enough for him that he pondered on them in secret, and limed the twig for those birds in the bush of the future which he had arranged with himself to catch. Mrs. Hamley had done the work for which he had bought her ; she

had placed him among the gentry of the place, and taught him the alphabet of good manners. And having done this, now, like one who has fulfilled her life's mission, she was free to depart to her own place so soon as it should seem good to her, leaving the ground open to another.

Meanwhile, the land-hunger must be fed; field added to field, farm to farm, and every corner of wood and meadow bought as eagerly as if each crooked elm had been a sapling oak and all the worthless alders hereditary yews. Wherever he appeared competition was useless, because his final offer was sure to be in excess of the market value. This made it good for the seller; if, on the other hand, the temptation of a fancy price induced men to sell who might have held on; and thus made homeless wanderers, and sometimes ruined speculators, of those who might have continued in the good old path of self-respecting independence and English proprietorship.

Also, if he was so far a benefactor to the world at large in that he was a good agricultural chemist and farmed high, to the small world near at hand he was by no means a blessing. He was a hard landlord, heart and hand, and if he gave employment he added sorrow to the wages. He beat men down at every

point, and took advantage of all collateral depressions in the labour-market. He grudged his labourers all but the bare life, and thought comfort, pleasure, education, refinement for "common people," not only foolish, but positively wicked. He denied with his whole force the doctrine that the poor had rights. They were simply to him the pabulum, the footstools, the hands and energies of the rich, and capital was superior to humanity. Rights? No! "What is mine is my own," was a favourite aphorism of his; and he acted on it.

One of the objects of his ambition—his ambition never extending beyond worldly things—had been to own a deer-park. There had been one at Abbey Holme long years ago when the jolly old monks had preached repentance and poverty to the godless laity, but had taken care to pad their own crosses with silk and wool, and to live on the fat of the land while they eulogised the lean. And Mr. Hamley had determined that he would restore it. To do this he had dismantled a hamlet which had grown up on the site of the deer-forest, evicting the cottagers with no more pity or scruple than if they had been so many rats which he had smoked out of their holes. His enforced exodus cost the lives of a few infants and aged folks. What did that signify?

The poor are too numerous as it is : a little thinning is an advantage.

He was famous, too, for pulling down the cottages on his estate ; making his labourers walk to their work sometimes five or six miles out, and the like distance in. Buildings, he said, were only so many drains on capital ; and as his highest idea of a man's life was the profitable employment of capital, duty to those under him had no place in his creed and formed no part of his practice. For duty is generally an expensive luxury ; and Mr. Hamley did not care for expensive luxuries which make no show, soothe no sense, and bring no renown.

In all these circumstances, then, it cannot be wondered at if Mr. Hamley, buying above market value every acre there was to sell, evicting his labourers like vermin, farming high but paying low, should be at once the most influential and the most unpopular man to be found in the district. He was even more disliked than Colonel Lowe ; who, if he let his tenants live like beasts in hovels that were not fit for beasts, and that stood at comparatively enormous rents, had a kind of excuse in that he was not over well off on the one hand, and on the other, that he was a gentleman and had thus an inherited right to treat the poor like beasts. It is a

way some gentlemen have. But when it came to a man popularly supposed to possess millions—a man who, as a ragged, barefooted lad, had known what it was to want a dinner more often than to have one, who had been thrashed for stealing turnips as the poor stopgaps of his emptiness, and who had been fed by some of the very men, or their fathers, whom he now turned adrift—when it came to such as he grinding the faces of the poor to the earth, was it to be wondered at if he was hated? And to do the Milltown labourers justice, they did hate him.

There was a certain farm at the north end of the Abbey Holme estate that had long been Mr. Hamley's Naboth's vineyard. It stood right in amongst his property, and was the thorn in his chaplet of roses, the poison in his cup of sweets. Long Field aggrieved him. It was a standing injury to the symmetry of his ring-fence, an enduring scoff at the wholeness of his ownership; and he coveted it. It never occurred to him that James Garth had inherited that land from his father and forbears ever since King Henry's time, and that it was he, Mr. Hamley, who had come in as the remover of old-time fences by his golden spade, not James Garth and his title-deeds that stood as the obstruction. When men are annoyed by circum-

stances, they do not care to consider whether they have voluntarily put themselves in the way of those circumstances or not, but speak as if they had been hemmed round by them without their own assistance. In this case it was simply "Ôte-toi que je m'y mets;" and the refusal was accounted both an insolence and a wrong.

Things had not gone well with James Garth. His father had been a hard liver in his time, too fond of the hounds and too free with the bottle to succeed in his life's business, which was to clean and crop his farm. Consequently the business he neglected failed to do well by him. When he died he left a handful of debts which came like a shower of hail about his son's ears, and which had crippled his energies to pay off. For James was a man with an immense amount of family pride. Not pride of that flashy kind which thinks no one good enough for it, but pride that cares to keep the family name unstained and the family honour bright; pride that is only another form of self-respect, incapable of meanness and to which treachery is as impossible.

But beside this characteristic, James Garth had also more than the average share of hope. He was sanguine by temperament, and always believed the better thing; and so had borne his heavy burdens

with a gallant courage, a simple faith in Providence and the turn of the lane, that gave an almost heroic flavour to his constancy. The two things that were as his very life's blood to him were, to redeem his father's debts and keep a good name. But just in proportion to his hope, his energy, his pride, while things were well with him, would be the collapse—if it came.

The struggle was an arduous one. He had a good wife and a large family; a wife who had wrought her day's work loyally, made the best of everything, wasted nothing, borne him a child every two years as regularly as the birds bring forth their young in spring-time, and given the children good health, good food, and a bright example. These young ones would be all of use by-and-by, but most of them were mere infants and children yet; and only one or two had got forward on their own account. Thomas, the eldest, of course stayed with his father, so did Robert, the next lad; but Alice, the eldest daughter, had gone out to service, and was now acting as lady's maid to Miss Drummond.

This had been a little hard at the first to Garth, owing to special circumstances connected with Mr. Hamley; else he would not have minded. His pride was not of that sort. He was only a peasant proprietor at the best, and he aimed at nothing

higher. He scarcely saw the need. He did not care to bring up his children on strawberries and cream like fine ladies, he said, but would rather let them take the rough of the world as well as the smooth; and he thought it no shame that Alice should take suit and service in a stranger's house, for all that the title-deeds of his farm, lying in the old black chest, were dated 1540. But it had cost him a struggle to let her go to Jabez Hamley's; though in the end common sense had conquered prejudice.

Besides this large family and his father's debts James Garth had made a bad speculation. A man came down from London and persuaded him that he had ironstone on his land, and that he had only to set about with a pickaxe and a few charges of gunpowder to make as much money as the owner of Abbey Holme had made out of his brewing vats. So he set to work and tore his land into holes here, and piled it into hummocks there, and lost his money and his time for the better part of six months. And when all was done he found that he had been fooled, and that he had spent his strength in slinging another millstone round his neck in addition to those made out of his father's debts, his round dozen of children to feed and clothe, and his want of capital to enable him to keep

pace with modern improvements; whereby he was ever at a disadvantage. For naturally the more a man puts into his land the more he gets out of it. A year or two of bad harvests had also made their mark; and the turn in the long lane in which poor Garth so courageously believed seemed farther off than ever.

There was no doubt about it. Set in the midst of Mr. Hamley's well-cleaned, steam-cultivated, lordly acres, Long Field had a ragged, poverty-stricken look that destroyed the harmony of the landscape; and its dandelions and thistles were an abomination. Nothing disguised, nothing extenuated, it was a rough bit of country, and by no means farmed up to its capabilities; but it was the man's own, and his all. And Mr. Hamley had no philanthropic desire of adding to the world's wealth in getting possession of it if he could. It was merely that it stood in the midst of his own estate, and he wanted his ring-fence to be symmetrical; besides having that land-hunger on him, exaggerated to voracity, which nothing short of inability to buy more would ever satisfy.

The creditors whom Garth had been obliged to make on his own account were now pressing on him. It had been a glad day for the poor fellow when he

had cleared his father's reputation ; and no Chinaman ever burnt incense before the tomb of his ancestors with more hearty satisfaction to his conscience than that which James Garth felt when he received the last receipt in full of all demands on the outstanding accounts, and brushed the last remains of dishonour from the old free-liver's memory. But he had done this only at the cost of new liabilities contracted on his own hand ; and with these and the losses occasioned by short crops and the man who had talked of ironstone and prophesied millions, things never looked worse for him. Take it how he might, there was a sore pinch before him, and he saw no way out of it save by borrowing on the security of the land, which had enough to do to support him and his without drawbacks.

All of which Mr. Hamley knew like the alphabet. Was not Alice Dora Drummond's maid ?—and were the tears so often in her eyes for nothing ? Besides, land-hunger is like any other instinct, keen in scenting its food and absolute in its need of satisfaction ; and Mr. Hamley's knowledge of the fields and farms that would fall to the first bidder, and which he had only to ride over to the house-door to secure, and of those which must eventually come into the market and were to be had for patient waiting, was

almost like an added sense, it was so acute and unerring.

"Well, wife, I shall have to do it at last!" said James, looking up from a dirty piece of paper that had done service for a letter, and which his eldest son had just brought up from the town. It was a letter from Cooper the wheelwright, who had just lent them three hundred pounds, and now wanted it back again without delay. And there were Jones and Martin and Crace, all of whom had lent him money to go on with, and all of whom would begin to clamour like birds in a nest, and to press their claims in a body if Cooper got paid and they were left out.

"What is it, James, my man?" asked his wife. The two were sitting in the kitchen at noonday, while the boys were gathering in to dinner. Mrs. Garth, with one child at her foot in the cradle and another at her knee, was knitting a coarse blue stocking, while her husband smoked his pipe in the chimney-corner and the pot bubbled and hissed over the fire. It was a cold, raw day, and the light and warmth of the kitchen were pleasant.

"What will you have to do?" she repeated.

"Lay a mortgage on the land," said James, his

eyes turned to the sanded floor, as if he could see his difficulties collected there.

"Ay? that sounds a bit awful," said Mrs. Garth.

"As bad as may be," her husband answered. "It seems just a break; the beginning of an upset root and branch."

"Why, James! that's not like you to look at the black side end foremost, and cry out before you are hurt!" said Mrs. Garth cheerily.

"Nay, it ain't," he answered back; "but somehow I am more down at this than I have ever been before. It seems as if it would never end, and I feel as if the place was slipping out of my hand somehow."

He sighed, and he seldom sighed, as he looked round with a kind of friendly fondness on all the things he knew so well and that were so full of old associations. His mother's samplers and his grandmother's, worked in silk with peacocks and quaint pyramidal trees, and "Anne Fletcher" signed to one in cross-barred letters, and "Alice Jones" to the other; things that he had always regarded as the highest efforts of creative genius in their way, sublime in industry and purely useless in intent; he would be sorry to part with them now, and suddenly they took a value in his eyes they had never had

before. Then there was the old china teapot, and some blue Delft plates that had been brought over by his uncle who had been a seafaring man, and had visited foreign parts; and the sea-shells on the mantelpiece in among the flat candlesticks and teacaddy, with one delicate vase of Venetian glass with a twisted thread run through its stem, filled with small cowries, that had an almost superstitious value in the family eyes. There was the old Dutch clock that ticked as it had ticked when he was a boy, with the cuckoo that came out of the little door when the hours struck, and chirped them as loud and natural as the real thing. How he had wondered at that cuckoo when he was a little lad!—and how he liked to see his mother draw up the weights with a noise that made his flesh tingle with a pleasant sense of awesome fear, just the same as his own little ones felt now as they peeped behind their mother's skirts when she drew up the chains, and they saw the big old pendulum swing from side to side as if it had life and a voice. The carved high-backed oaken chairs, and the carved bureau for which once a gentleman staying at Abbey Holme offered him twenty pounds—he almost wished now that he had lost the chest and taken the money; the sanded floor where

he and his brothers had bored holes, and the father had called them worms; the deep chimney-place with a settle at each side, where the pot was hanging with the dinner of potato-stew seething over the peat fire; the rack where the guns and whips hung; the shelves among the rafters where the wife kept her stores out of the reach of small marauding hands:—all these thousand trifles which make up home seemed to come before him with more vitality, more rooting power than they had ever had before, and to render the possibilities of his position more bitter.

Just then came riding up Mr. Hamley of Abbey Holme. He had been to his plantation ahead, and he thought he would look in at Long Field on his way back. He had seen Cooper the wheelwright yesterday, and had told him carelessly, as a matter of common knowledge, that Garth was insolvent out and out; and that his creditors would not get sixpence in the pound if they did not look sharp. Farming at a loss was not a good groundwork for the liquidation of outstanding debts, he had said; and for his own part he was glad he had none of his money lying among the Long Field weeds, for he should as soon expect to shovel up last year's snow as to see a penny of it

back again if it had once got into James Garth's hands.

He had had no qualms of conscience in saying all this. Garth would be forced to sell, he argued—for the good of the Abbey Holme estate—and it was ridiculous his holding on. Anything therefore that would hasten that necessity was so far to the right side of the general account, if to the wrong of poor Garth's, individually.

"But the world is made up of the individuals who succeed and those who fail," said Mr. Hamley, flinging back his coat; "and every man has the power to choose which he will be. *I* chose the first, and James Garth has selected the second; consequently, I have purchased Abbey Holme and he will have to sell Long Field."

This was an epigrammatic way of putting matters that pleased him; and Cooper thought that a man who spoke so sharp must have a judgment to match; as poor Garth found out to-day when he came in from mending a few fences to his dinner of potato-stew, and to exchange a loving word with his wife and children.

Mr. Hamley rode up to the farm-house door, and his man in his smart groom's livery took his horse as he dismounted.

"Well, James," he said, stooping as he came through the doorway; which he need not have done.

He was very spruce in his dark-blue overcoat with its broad velvet collar; very clean about his close-shaven chin; very sleek and prosperous, and well got-up from head to heel; and not in any way like the lad who had many a time held old Garth's horse for a penny, and more than once been fed at the farm as you would feed a tramp or a stray dog.

"My man," said Mr. Hamley, "you should keep your land cleaner. Yon fields of yours are not fit for pigs. What with stones and weeds, they are fairly a disgrace, and that's a fact."

"I see nothing amiss with them," replied James a trifle surlily.

He was nettled at the rich man's superior manner. It always did nettle him.

"You want more capital," said Mr. Hamley pompously, but with the carelessness of one to whom capital is plentiful; speaking as if he had said that Garth wanted more chaff, more straw, more sand.

"That's sooner said nor done," said James, his Saxon face aflame.

He was a fair, ruddy man of forty-two or so; in his prime; genial, openbrowed, frank; a good tempered fellow, but quick too; a man whose blood was

not sluggish, yet more passionate than rancorous ; but a man wanting mental fibre of a kind, and to be overcome by an adverse fate.

"I was hearing at the town that Cooper was coming on you," continued Mr. Hamley.

"Ay? that is strange, now," said Garth.

"It will be a heavy pull to pay him off," said Mr. Hamley.

"Ay," he repeated; "you are about right there."

"I wonder you don't sell the place for what it will fetch," said Mr. Hamley. "It's worsening year by year, and you'll go under with it."

"I'll not sell, and I'll stick to the land," said James slowly.

"Well, you are your own man, and can do as you please; but I'd give you a tidy price for it if you liked to sell," Mr. Hamley said with a familiar tone and a broader accent than that which Mrs. Hamley had taught him to use. "We're old acquaintances now, Garth, and I remember when your father was a man above my height. You'd rather see the land in my hands, I imagine, than in a stranger's; and I'd do justice by it and you."

"I'll hold on," said James.

"You will? Hold on to what? A bunch of weeds

and a bed of thistles ! What's the good of holding on to land you can't farm, man ? I'd sell if I was you, and could get my price."

"No, you wouldn't sell if you was me, if even you could get your price," retorted James. "What your father had left you, you'd like to leave to your son—as I do, and as every Englishman would if he could. I'd liefer have a rood of English land than a dozen acres in a foreign country," said James.

"Stuff ! you carry your country on your back," said Mr. Hamley. "A man's country is where he can buy the best coat and get the best dinner. Country ! what signifies country, where they can speak the language like yourself ? The Americans are English," he added with ethnological generosity ; "and America's the place where a handy man like you would make his fortune."

"Mr. Hamley," said James Garth suddenly, "you've made your offer, and you've had your answer. I'll not sell till the bailies take me, and I'll not cry caught till the game's lost. Now wife, if you'll turn out the pot perhaps Mr. Hamley'll take a bit of dinner with us. It would not be the first, I reckon, he's had at Long Field, by many."

"Thank you ; no. I shall partake of lunch at

home," said Mr. Hamley, with a sudden return to his finer manner, and an angry flash in his small dark eyes. "I think you're foolish, James, but we have good authority for not meddling with a man's folly; and so I leave you to yours. Good day. Good day, Mrs. Garth."

"Good day, sir," said Mrs. Garth, with a curtsy. "And how's Alice coming on?"

"Oh, very fair, I fancy," answered Mr. Hamley condescendingly. "She's young yet, but she'll improve; and I don't hear Miss Drummond complain."

"I'm glad she suits," said the mother respectfully, as so much useful capital of which her daughter might have the interest. "My duty, sir, to your lady and Miss Drummond."

"Good day, Mr. Hamley," said James curtly. "Now, wife, the dinner."

"Curse the fellow's insolence!" muttered the rich man as he rode off.

James Garth repeated the very same words as he sat down to his dinner with a heavy heart and a hot head, and the most passionate desire to break Jabez Hamley's.

And yet what had Mr. Hamley done? Literally a kindness, according to his way of putting it. He had offered a thousand pounds clear gain over and

above the market value of a piece of badly-farmed land—that is, he would have made a clean gift of the same to induce an insolvent landowner to sell what he could not keep. Garth, perversely perhaps, took it that his father's former charity-lad had traded on his necessities, and offered him a bribe to let go his cherished patrimony. It was common sense and feeling—the logic of wealth dealing with poverty according to material values and outside human emotions, and the passionate anguish of a luckless man rebelling against facts and logic, and asking only help and sympathy.

CHAPTER IV.

LATE FOR LUNCHEON.

INSTEAD of turning in at the Abbey Holme gates when he passed them on his way from Long Field, Mr. Hamley did violence to the domestic institution of luncheon, and cantered off to Milltown. He thought it best to take time by the forelock, and to have the first word with Mr. Simpson, the local lawyer, before Garth could put in his oar. So, grievously harassing that unfortunate gentleman by his untimely visit, disturbing him at his dinner, much to Mrs. Simpson's disgust, spoiling his food and deranging his digestion, he opened at once on his business.

He had no need to manage appearances with Mr. Simpson. He had long ago bought him, body and soul, and held him in his hand able to crush him at a moment's notice. The lawyer had nothing for it, then, but a flexible back-bone and a

plastic conscience; and, to keep on good terms with his master and creditor, let what would stand in his path or be trampled out of it, was the only way open to him. Milltown, by-the-bye, wondered that Mr. Hamley, who did everything in such a grandiose manner, and who never touched clay when he could handle gold, should employ Simpson at all. A low-class, second-rate man as he was, it was odd that the eminently respectable, self-made master of Abbey Holme should stand by him rather than by Mr. Perkins, who was at the head of his profession in these parts, and a really honourable and worthy gentleman. But Mr. Hamley gave it as his reason that Simpson had once been kind to him in the days when he needed a friend; "and I never forget a kindness, and never forsake a friend," said Mr. Hamley of Abbey Holme, airing his gratitude ostentatiously.

"Simpson," said Mr. Hamley abruptly, as the lawyer, a sandy-haired, red-eyed, furtive kind of person, came sideways into the room, "you'll be hearing from James Garth, of Long Field, one of these fine days."

"Yes, sir, so I anticipate," said Mr. Simpson. "By all accounts, he's in a bad way, is James."

"Couldn't be worse," said Mr. Hamley. Then,

after a pause; "There's Cooper pressing him for money, and the fool refuses to sell."

"Cooper pressing him for money and he refuses to sell—what a fool indeed, as you say, sir!" echoed Mr. Simpson.

"I have just offered him two thousand for his farm, and he says no," continued Mr. Hamley, in an injured tone.

"Two thousand, and he says no! he doesn't see his own interests," repeated Simpson.

"That's what I told him not half an hour ago; but, Lord! you might as well speak to a stone wall as to him! He's blind and deaf and stupid, that's what he is; and he can't see his bread when it's stuck under his nose buttered side uppermost. He's the most of a pig's-head I've ever come across, and he'll have to suffer for his folly. Such men always do."

"No doubt, sir, no doubt. As you say, such men always do. I'm sorry for him, but if he *will* cut his own throat—why——" The lawyer spread out his hands, and shrugged his shoulders, intimating that he abandoned James Garth to that interesting operation, and washed his hands of all responsibility in the matter of sharpening the razors.

"Sorry for him!" said Mr. Hamley fiercely;

"how can you be such a fool as to say that, Simpson? Sorry for a born jackass who won't take advice, and pocket a cool thousand when it's given him!"

"Well, not exactly sorry perhaps, but one would rather see him wiser," apologized the lawyer, bowing.

Mr. Hamley frowned. "I don't do much myself in the way of soft soap and sawder," he said insolently; "I leave that to you, Simpson. And as for wishing him any ways different to what he is, you might as well wish a mole was a hawk and that geese didn't cackle."

The lawyer laughed and smoothed his hair. "He! he! he! you'll excuse me, Mr. Hamley, but you are so very funny sir!" he said. "As I always say, if you want to hear what I call a regular out-and-out good thing, there's no one that comes near Mr. Hamley of Abbey Holme. That's the genuine article and no mistake!"

"Well, I always was accounted a droll dog," answered Mr. Hamley with a self-satisfied smile, stretching out his legs and running his fingers through his bushy black whiskers. "Many's the time I've kept them all in a roar down at Ledbury's, when I was junior and hadn't what one may call

so much to keep up as now. I was king of my company, that's what I was, and could cut a joke or sing a song with the best of them."

"That's what all Milltown says, sir!" cried Mr. Simpson enthusiastically.

"And Milltown has made worse guesses in its day and been farther off the bull's-eye than here," said Mr. Hamley. Whereat they both laughed. This was one of the great man's witticisms: a fair specimen of the kind of thing which made him king of his company. "But I did not come here to crack jokes; I came to talk business," he said, breaking off suddenly.

"And business be it," returned Mr. Simpson, grave on the instant, and assuming his professional manner like a mask.

"Garth will come here for a mortgage," said Mr. Hamley, checking off his first proposition on his fingers.

"Just so."

"You must find the money." This was the second, marked off in the same way.

Mr. Simpson made two strokes on his blotting-pad.

"And you must lend it on your own hand, and give him rope. Give him twelve hundred if he

wants it, at five per cent. That will be a tidy lot; and when he has it, he's hooked."

"He is," said Mr. Simpson.

"And then one of the eyesores of the neighbourhood will be abolished," said Mr. Hamley, taking up his grand manner; "and Long Field will be farmed as it ought to be."

"Which will be a public benefaction, Mr. Hamley," said the lawyer.

"I think so too, Simpson, I think so too," he answered pompously. "I think I may say I have deserved well of Milltown for the good I have done the land. It was weeds and rubbish, most of it, when I found it—a set of beggarly bankrupts, that's what they were—and I have made it, as one might say, a smiling garden."

"You have, sir; and a beautiful simile it is."

"And yet that pig-headed brute would not sell!" said Mr. Hamley with his injured tone.

"Incredible!" returned the lawyer; "most extraordinary!"

"You may well say that," said Mr. Hamley. "Meantime see to the note of hand when Garth calls, and give him rope."

"I will, sir; rope enough to hang him," said Mr. Simpson with an unpleasant laugh.

Mr. Hamley frowned, as he had frowned before ; this time from a benevolent motive. "I don't like such harsh expressions, Simpson," he said sternly. "They are unchristian, and not the thing."

"I am sorry I offended, sir," Mr. Simpson answered with a contrite look. "But one is apt to let one's feelings run away with one, even in office hours ; and a man who's no friend to one who has been, as I may say, the making of me and mine—why, I can't be very soft on him, you see, sir."

"Yes, all that is proper enough," Mr. Hamley answered ; "but don't let your zeal get ahead of your discretion, that's all."

And the lawyer answered, "No, sir, I will not," humbly.

What good these two men proposed to themselves by this little transparent farce, it would have been difficult for either to have explained ; but it was the kind of thing they kept up together, and each assumed that he deceived the other.

"By-the-bye, Simpson, how about the last quarter's interest from Cragfoot ?" asked Mr. Hamley suddenly. "Paid yet ?"

"No, sir. Money's bad to get from the Colonel ; grows tighter quarter by quarter."

"Overdue how long?"

"A week and two days."

"Give him a full fortnight, and then——"

Mr. Hamley indulged in a little pantomime expressive of turning a screw.

"I understand, sir," said Mr. Simpson, with another hieroglyphic on the blotting-pad. "A fortnight's grace, and then the screw?"

"Just so: not too hard at first, you know. Gently does it, but fast hold all the same. You understand."

"All right, sir; I know."

"Well then, I think I have no more to say; so good morning to you," said Mr. Hamley, flinging a condescending nod to his tool, who bowed as low as if the master of Abbey Holme, Ledbury's successful office-boy, was the Dalai-Lama in person, and he one of his chosen worshippers. Then, mounting his showy bay, Mr. Hamley cantered up the street, followed by his smart groom also on a showy bay, luncheon waiting for him at home—as he knew.

"Why, whatever has kept you all this long time, Mr. S.!" was Mrs. Simpson's querulous ejaculation rather than question, as her husband went into the dingy little back parlour where his cold chop and flat beer awaited him.

"That beast Hamley!" was his reply. "I wish the devil would wring his neck for him!"

"Law, Simpson, how you do talk!" said his wife. "But I don't wonder at your being in a wax; it is rousing to be wanting one's dinner and it a spoiling on the hob."

"It's more rousing to have to do that beast's dirty work," said Mr. Simpson, fencing with his conscience in that curious way in which slaves and cowards compound for the evil they commit by throwing the shame of responsibility on the man who has bought them, and is now driving them to iniquity.

"Well, he saved us when we wanted a good turn," said Mrs. Simpson with a wife's natural contradiction and aggravating gratitude for the benefits which gall her husband. "And it's only natural he should be wanting his money's worth somehow. If you didn't want him on your hands, you should have been careful to keep him off them."

"Don't be a fool, woman, and hold your mag on things you don't understand," said Mr. Simpson coarsely.

Whereat Mrs. Simpson tossed her head and said, "Well, I'm sure!" in a pet in which she continued to the end of the day; though it was uncomfortable,

because she wanted to tell her lord some Milltown gossip she had just heard—how that those heathenish Fletchers were getting as thick as thieves with Miss Kemball up there at the Abbey, and Miss Biggs did say she expected soon to have an order, and she supposed they would do it handsome.

When James Garth went down that night to Mr. Simpson's he found everything as smooth as velvet. The lawyer happened to have just twelve hundred pounds of his own to which he was as welcome as the flowers in May; and he would draw out the note of hand as he stood there. This would pay off all his creditors at one stroke, and give him a tidy little sum to put into the land for better crops next harvest-time. Twelve hundred pounds! It would set him square, he hoped, both now and in the future; and he might take his own time to pay it off.

No, he would not put that into the bond, he said, when Garth, with a peasant's natural acuteness where land is concerned, wanted it expressly stated under stamp and seal that the money should not be called in before such a date, and then not until due notice had been given. There must be some kind of trust between man and man; and besides, it was not professional. All he

could do, or would, was to lend the money at five per cent., and to promise verbally that, unless unforeseen accidents should arise—which he did not contemplate, but for which he would not hold himself responsible should they come—he would not call it in while the interest was paid regularly, and the I.O.U. looked safe.

And as need was pressing, and this was the best he could do, James Garth took the loan on these conditions; and manfully set himself to overlay a certain uneasy sense of insecurity with the rose-coloured hopefulness of his buoyant temper.

As Mr. Hamley was riding smartly homewards, he said to himself again and again what a remarkably easy thing it was to be successful, and how pleasant life was to the man who knew how to make hay while the sun shone, and to take time and Mr. Simpson by the forelock! He had no sympathy for all those white-livered dyspeptic fellows who go about the world shoes down at heel and coats out at elbows, unsuccessful and unhappy. Look at him, how *he* managed! Why, men were so many puppets in his hand, and he was the master who pulled the strings and made them dance to his tunes. There was Colonel Lowe now; he thought himself master of Cragfoot, did he? Ah, he little

knew that he was no better than a dog in a kennel, and might be turned out at any moment! He swaggered and gave himself airs, did he? Well, let him swagger. If he came too near a certain forbidden subject, he would simply have to learn his master before the week was out, that was all. If he behaved himself decently, and that cub of his married money, well, he might drag on a little longer in Cragfoot if he liked. It all depended on his, the secret owner's, mood, and what he wanted to do with the place himself. What a glow of satisfaction that thought of power gave him! Perhaps—he didn't know—but perhaps, if Patricia married to his liking, he might give her the Colonel's house as her portion. It would not be unpleasant to his pride to have the world say how generously he had dowered his wife's niece; and it would not be unpleasant to revenge himself on the Colonel for certain well-remembered insolences of bygone times, when the smart young owner of Cragfoot had cracked his whip over the ragged lad loitering at Ledbury's door, and treated him as he would be treated in his turn one of these fine days, if there was justice on earth or in heaven!

Whenever Mr. Hamley spoke openly to men of his former life, he spoke of it with the courageous

confession of a wise and brave man. Whenever he thought of it, he lost his inner self-mastery. Those who had befriended him and those who had insulted him, were equally in his Index of the future, and equally to be punished. Colonel Lowe was of the latter; James Garth of the former; and both had to bear the weight of his hand now that this hand had power. He had them. He had got both the big fish and the little one in his net, and he felt as a good man feels who has fulfilled his life's highest intention. It was odd how he had coveted that Long Field Farm! The want of it had soured all the sweets of his other possessions; but now—he drew a deep breath as he mounted the hill whence he could see Abbey Holme lying fair and stately amid its magnificent oaks and beeches, and his eyes wandered far over his own estate—with the smoking chimney of Long Field to be soon added to the rest.

But as he drew nearer to his own home, the image of what was waiting for him there became more and more distinct, and the effect sobering in proportion. He pictured to himself the expression on Mrs. Hamley's face: he knew it so well!—and the form of the punishment waiting for him became photographically distinct. He knew her way; it

was stereotyped. She would remain immovable in the drawing-room after luncheon was announced: her ladylike work of many colours folded up and laid aside; her pale eyes fixed on the clock; waiting with crisped lips and voiceless forbearance until the truant should make his appearance. Over and over again he had besought her to give him just five minutes' law when he happened to be late, which was seldom, and then to lunch without him. And over and over again his wife had assured him, with the tart submission of a deferential code grafted on to an aggressive character, which was her way, that she should never dream of failing so far in her duty to him. If he chose to forget what was due to her, she used to say with the severe patience, the aggressive humility under which he had so often writhed, she was not justified in following his example. He was the master if she was the lady; and the master must be attended to first of all things. It might not be good manners to keep her waiting; but husbands did not always trouble themselves about manners in their own homes.

He knew by heart the air with which she would take his arm the instant he went in, and walk solemnly to the dining-room, compressed and grim if her mood was confessedly warlike, or pathetically

patient if she was in the humour to stab through wool; as sometimes happened in her more subtle days. He knew how they would sit down in funereal silence to their sumptuous meal, with all the made dishes cold—and they could have been so easily kept hot! he thought with a prophetic pang! for Mr. Hamley liked good living—with the servants, who had been kept hanging about in expectant state, cross and hungry, and civilly showing the worst side of everything, as servants can, all in the way of duty and their lawful service. He knew how the disturbed arrangements of the afternoon would be flung at him in a disordered heap; and the whole day with some subsequent ones thrown out of gear; all for that lost half-hour. He already heard the meekly injured tone in which she would refuse everything offered to her: “I cannot eat that, John. It is spoilt with waiting;” the elaborate sympathy with which she would apologize to Dora and Patricia for the uncomfortable state of the table; and, without a word of direct reproach, how she would heap burning coals on his recreant head, accepting his excuses with a frosty smile and a stiff inclination of her well-attired body, her eyes saying as plainly as words, “I know that you are telling falsehoods, but you are the master and I am the slave, and I

must set an example of wifely submission to the girls."

For unpunctuality at meals was one of the cardinal vices at Abbey Holme, where it was held as an undoubted article of faith that life had been given to man for the careful codification of conventionalities, and not that conventionalities had been created for the better regulation of life.

Visions such as these, with dear Dora's pretty face and dove-like eyes as his sunshine in the cloudy sky, her tacit but eloquent amiability, desirous to please both and careful to hurt neither, flanked by glimpses of Patricia's directer endeavours to show him that she at least was sorry for his discomfiture; which only made her aunt angry with her and more disagreeable to himself—"the girl has a good heart, but she is deuced upsetting in a house, and as vulgar as you please!" was his unspoken commentary on her honest sympathy—held the man's pride a trifle low in the direction of home, to balance the hunter's joy in having trapped his game so securely that whenever he chose to snap the lid he would hold his prize in his hand, to deal with as seemed good to him.

And this last thought brought him to the Abbey Holme door—with Mrs. Hamley waiting on the other side of it.

CHAPTER V.

PAYING VISITS.

MRS. HAMLEY was a regal kind of woman in her way, and like other royalties had a profound objection to all derangement of plans. She had appointed the carriage to be at the door at a certain moment, and her calculations founded thereon had been made with the exactness of a Chinese puzzle. As it was, everything was displaced. And this was an unpardonable offence. The days were short, and the visits which she had arranged to pay suddenly became of paramount importance; after having been delayed for weeks innocuously, entailing no end of social misdemeanours now by being carried over into another day. There is no need to say that for the last hour life at Abbey Holme had not been joyous, and that the burden of human miseries had been heavy.

“Very sorry, Lady,” said Mr. Hamley, coming

in from his dressing flushed and flustered. Mrs. Hamley would not have sat down with him had he not been dressed—as he called it, to the “nines,” but she, “as a gentleman.”

“Your arm, Mr. Hamley,” was the lady’s curt response.

“I have been detained by business of the most important kind, else I would not have delayed you,” he continued, still flustered, and louder than usual, more parabolic too than usual in consequence.

“Shall we sit down while you explain your affairs, Mr. Hamley, or shall we go in to luncheon, which has been waiting a full hour?” said Mrs. Hamley, withdrawing her hand from his own and looking at him sternly.

Mr. Hamley laughed uneasily as he picked up the lean long fingers and laid them on his coat sleeve; glanced at dear Dora—looking discreetly another way, and at Patricia—looking in pained reprobation at her aunt; and then walked off in silence to the dining-room, conscious that the time for propitiation had not arrived. And as they went, Patricia behind backs took up dear Dora bodily by the waist, and carried her for a few steps with dreadfully rude ease, as her form of protest against the dead dulness of the last hour

and the sourness of the present moment. Had Mrs. Hamley looked round, things would not have been harmonious for Patricia for the next day or two.

Her iniquity, however, passed off without detection; and as Dora did not laugh or scream, being too angry with the girl for the one part and too frightened of her sure share of Mrs. Hamley's wrath should they be discovered for the other, and as, moreover, deep indignation at Mr. Hamley's domestic sin of unpunctuality had exercised so many of Mrs. Hamley's faculties as to leave her none for suspicion, she noted nothing of the little flutter that went on in the hall, as that incorrigible niece of hers affronted the genius loci once again as so many times before, and scared the lares and penates as a kitten might scare a cage full of white mice.

After an uncomfortable meal during which the carriage came round—an additional log to the fire of Mrs. Hamley's anger—they all set off to pay visits. This too, was one of Mrs. Hamley's regular ways. She liked to do things in a certain cumbrous state, and to be attended when she went out. It was a rare mark of social familiarity when she went with Dora alone to any house. As a rule, she exacted Mr. Hamley's company as the marital

Goldstick whose duty it was to accompany her ; and Patricia was now also part of her personal court.

To-day she especially desired to have all things done decently and with more than ordinary pomp and propriety. She was going to Cragfoot and the Rectory ; and more, she was going for the first time to the Quest, where the flag was flying—the family having come down. And Lord Merrian was a personable young man who might—who knows?—thought Mrs. Hamley with a critical look at the two young ladies who sat, discreet and demure, facing her.

They were pretty girls, each in her own way ; and she would not grudge the prize to one for the sake of the other. For if Dora won it—well, dear Dora was her own creation, as well as her personal favourite, and she could say with pride : “ Look at the results of my training ! a coronet as the reward of learning lady-like deportment and self-suppression at my hands ! ” And if Patricia won it—Patricia was of her own blood, and she could glorify herself in “ My niece, Lady Merrian,” or, please heaven to take the dear Earl from a sinful world to glory, “ My niece, Lady Dovedale.” Stronger brains than Mrs. Hamley’s have woven as solid-looking romances out of as

slight materials, and have been quite as sure of success—if only other people had not fingered the threads and broken in upon the pattern.

By way of parenthesis, it may be observed here that, because Mrs. Hamley elected to be accompanied by her husband when she was out doing her royalties, she was by no means blind to his deficiencies in the art of manner and the science of good breeding. Indeed, no one saw so clearly as she did when and where he failed; no one knew so well the thinness of the veneer with which she had laboured so hard to conceal the inherent coarseness of the original material. But Mrs. Hamley was a clever social reasoner. She knew that courage and constancy are the only methods by which a conventional misdeemeanour can be rendered respectable; and that when you have made an unfitting marriage say, the only thing to do is to carry your conjugal flag bravely to the front, and appear profoundly ignorant of rents and rags. To try to merge her marriage in her own personality was a mistake Mrs. Hamley was far too acute to commit. She had sold herself for a consideration, and she had so much more honour than usually belongs to women who marry for money, that she loyally performed her part, and never flinched from the obligations it entailed. Her hus-

band was a coarse, showy snob; she knew that well enough, and she knew that the world knew it; but the unwritten convention between them had been her social countenance and wifely loyalty in return for his money and conjugal respect; and the bond had been faithfully kept. All the world believed that she did really love her black-haired, florid, big-fisted Plutus, who was not a gentleman for all his acres; and that he in his turn loved his faded, elderly, ultra-refined wife: and the belief counted as a medal of gold and a chain of silver in their honour. If they had quarrelled in public, or in any way allowed men to see that they confessed to a mistake, they would have been cut. As it was, union gave strength, and the success of the marriage commanded respect.

Consequently, when Mrs. Hamley went in state to-day to the Quest, which represented Windsor Castle to the Milltown world, she went with this marital Goldstick of hers by her side. And though it was a trial that took all her force to bear with dignity, it was one which she was conscious had certain solid favourable issues not to be despised, and which must therefore be borne bravely.

The first place at which the handsome ponderous carriage stopped was Cragfoot. They found Mrs.

Lowe at home, plaintive and taciturn as ever; tumbled as to her attire; dishevelled about the head; wrapped in a rhubarb-coloured shawl, and afflicted with her eternal catarrh; taking mournful views of life generally, and specially of all that pertained to that particular day. She was a weak-spirited lady at all times, like some middle-aged Niobe, the spiritual mother of tears and the heiress of undesignated woe.

Miserable always, Mrs. Lowe would have been hard put to it had she been obliged to crystallize her sorrows into a definite shape. Everything afflicted her; from the decadence of England to the flighty manners of the maids; from the horrible atmosphere of Milltown—of Milltown specially, more horrible there than anywhere else in England—to the high hedge round one neighbour's garden and the low wall round another's. She hated the country and she loved London. Once when, for his own purposes, the Colonel had let Cragfoot for a year and had lived in London, she had wept all the day and bemoaned herself all the night for hatred of Blandford Square and desire to be again at Cragfoot. When Sydney was born she refused to be comforted because he was a boy and not a girl; had he been a girl she would have held herself accursed

in that nature had denied her a man-child. Whatever was wrong with poor Mrs. Lowe, the root and heart of whose misfortunes was—her husband, grafted on to a chronic disturbance of her digestion, and energies reduced thereby to zero.

While they were sitting with her, Patricia wondering why she was so melancholy yet pitying her so much—and Dora with her smiles, her downcast eyes and air of lovely amiability, doing all she knew to charm Sydney's mother; and not succeeding—Mrs. Lowe being sharper than she looked—the door opened, and the Colonel and his son walked in.

The former was debonair, handsome, haggard, insolent as usual; the gentleman's insolence, united with a perfect manner, a pure accent, and a charming voice: the latter pale, with that look of evil resolution about his thin lips and the fire in his dark eyes which those who knew had learnt to dread. He had made up his mind what to do, and he came prepared to act out his resolve.

Scarcely greeting the rest of the company, he made his way straight to Dora sitting on the ottoman throwing flies of fascination for Mrs. Lowe, and shook hands with her in a familiar, half-tender and half-defying manner, which went like an electric shock through the room. Mrs. Hamley saw it and

Mr. Hamley saw it; the Lowes saw it; and even Patricia's unsuspicious nature was enlightened with the rest. Each made his or her comment on what she or he saw, and all looked at Dora, to see how she would bear herself, and whether she would repel or encourage such an audacious advance.

She blushed for her first reply, and her eyes drooped for her second. She was frightened, not pleased; and wished that Sydney had not shown his hand so clearly, nor drawn her into the fray. She would have infinitely preferred that he should have gone into the battle alone—for there was a battle to be fought, and a hard one—and have called her in only to share the victory when he had won it. But the ordeal had to be passed; and it behoved her to be careful of her way among the ploughshares. One false step, and the whole thing would be over for her! And the first step she made was to answer the young man's daring address with her own dexterous power of conciliation; not angering him by her coldness nor the others by her warmth, but just accepting quietly what she could not disclaim, and making herself a party to no policy but the policy of peace. She was set between opposing fires, and she dodged gracefully.

“What a clever little baggage!” said the Colonel

to himself, as he read her with an accuracy of observation to be got only from a certain class of men who have studied in a certain school of women. "For all her softness that girl has the go of the devil in her! And this thing—what is she like?"

He turned his handsome, haggard face to the fresh and innocent one framed in its loose waves of brown hair, watching Dora anxiously; and from that moment the two girls were stereotyped in his mind as Brinvilliers and Joan of Arc.

The Cragfoot drawing-room opened into a conservatory.

"Have you seen our ferns?" Sydney asked abruptly, speaking to Dora without prefix or annex.

"No," answered Dora, with the sweetest air of modest unconsciousness.

This was another ploughshare dexterously avoided by the clever little feet, which understood wary walking.

"Come with me; I want to show you *my* maiden-hair," said Sydney, looking full at the sunny little fringe meandering tendril-like about her temples.

The anonymity of his address was not lost on his

hearers; and Mr. Hamley's face was a study that had its lessons for those who cared to read.

"We have a great beauty at home," said Dora simply.

Sydney laughed. "I know that," he said, still looking at her feathery curls; "but I will back mine against any other person's. Come and see it."

He stood up and offered her his hand, and for politeness she could not refuse her own.

With a well-managed look of appeal to Mrs. Hamley, taking in Mrs. Hamley's husband by the way, she laid her dainty little close-gloved hand in his as she slowly rose from her seat. He drew it within his arm, and carried her off to the conservatory; speaking to her in a low voice and bending his face near to hers, as they walked across the room in this rather unusual fashion of going for two young people in an ordinary drawing-room filled with ordinary gentlemen and ladies. It was all done, however, more defiantly than tenderly—a challenge rather than a caress.

"Oh, do be careful, Syd!" said Dora in a frightened whisper over the maidenhair.

"No, Dora, I will not. I am going to bring things to a head," said Sydney. "I swear this

shall not go on any longer. It shall be one thing or the other."

He spoke fiercely, like a flame of fire translated into words.

"It is one thing already, dear," said Dora with one of her most enchanting looks.

"If you look like that you will drive me wild! You know I cannot stand those eyes of yours, Dora!" cried Sydney.

"You silly boy!" lisped Dora, casting down her eyes and looking up from under her brows with the prettiest, most coquettish modesty. "I will not look at you at all then! Will that be right?"

"No, Dody; I should go mad then," said Sydney, with his hand on hers.

"Poor thing!—you are in a bad way!" she laughed. "Why, what will please you?"

"Not your ridicule, Dora!" he answered savagely.

He had a tindery kind of temper, whereon sparks were never wanting; the irritable temper of a selfish man who holds that the world and all within it were created for his pleasure, and who refuses to take his share of any of the disagreeables that may be afloat.

"Play is not ridicule, dear," said Dora gently. "You ought to know by now, Syd, that I would do nothing in the world to vex you."

But though she spoke with such delicious patience, in her own mind surged up the same contemptuous feeling that she had for Mr. and Mrs. Hamley when she obeyed, soothed, and tricked them. To her, inwardly so strong, outwardly so yielding, the men and women whom she managed were little better than children whom she deceived for their own good, while allowing them to consider themselves supreme.

"And nothing to please me," Sydney answered, his face darkening. "Temporise, temporise, wait, do nothing; that is your policy, Dora, and I am sick of it!"

"You will ruin us both if you do not follow it," said Dora earnestly. "Cannot you see, Syd, that we must have your father's consent before we can make a move? What would become of us if he refused as well as Mr. Hamley? I know that Mr. Hamley will refuse; but if Colonel Lowe consents we are independent."

"And why the devil should Mr. Hamley refuse?" cried Sydney in a rage.

Dora looked meek. "I am sure I don't know,"

she said ; " unless he does not like parting with his money."

" Well, Dora, whatever happens I have made up my mind. I will speak to my father to-night and to Mr. Hamley to-morrow."

" Not to Mr. Hamley unless your father consents," she pleaded. " We shall be no nearer if you do—only farther off than before."

" Then what do you propose, Dora ?" asked Sydney insolently.

" Patience, dear," said Dora, raising her pretty eyes. " Patience and enough to eat ; not impatience and starvation."

" If you two young people have concluded with examining the flowers we will proceed," said Mr. Hamley behind them.

He spoke in his finest accent and with his deepest voice ; and Dora started as if a salvo of artillery had thundered over her head. They had not heard him come. He had taken good care they should not.

" We have quite done," she said, looking at him shyly. " Mr. Lowe was only showing me his ferns. Is it not a beauty, Mr. Hamley ?" she continued, passing her fingers across a miserable little specimen which even Mr. Hamley, who knew

nothing about flowers or ferns, could see was not worth the pot in which it grew.

"If that is what you have been admiring I can't say much for your taste! It seems to me a heap of time wasted in looking at them weeds!" he said coarsely, passion warring against grammar, and grammar getting the worst of it; as it always did when he was excited.

"You cannot wonder at any one's forgetting how time goes in Miss Drummond's presence," said Sydney, gallantly as to manner, insolently as to intention, so far as Mr. Hamley was concerned.

Though it was a matter of vital importance to him as things stood to keep fair with Mr. Hamley, even to make him his friend if possible, he would not control himself to courtesy when the fit took him to be aggressive. And as the fit was on him now he indulged it. He hated Mr. Hamley, and he did not care to conceal it. He hated him partly because of his bad manners and his large means, but chiefly because Dora Drummond lived in his house—and he had power over her.

"Excuse me," said the master of Abbey Holme and Mr. Simpson's invisible client Jones, who had lent the money for which Cragfoot was mortgaged; "but if there is one thing more than another I

think no gentleman should do, it is passing compliments on ladies when they are under another gentleman's protection."

"I was not aware that Miss Drummond was under any gentleman's protection—more than my own at this moment," said Sydney, looking at him straight in the eyes.

"Then I do," said Mr. Hamley, taking Dora's hand and pulling it roughly through his arm. "I am this young lady's protector, sir, and I wish the world to know as much."

"Miss Drummond must decide for herself," said Sydney, tossing up his curly head with an insolent laugh. "Which is it, Dora?"

"Which is it'—what?" said Mr. Hamley with a fierce scowl. "Can I believe my ears?"

"That is just what Midas said," sneered Sydney.

Mr. Hamley let fall a thundering oath. "Is it come to this—'Dora,' to *you*?" he said furiously. "Let me know what it all means, or by——"

"I am sure Mr. Lowe will apologise for his mistake; for he is not in the habit of calling me Dora," said Dora, hurriedly interrupting the objurgation on its path. "I do not think you meant to offend either Mr. Hamley or myself, Mr. Lowe," she continued in her peace-making way,

looking at Sydney and smiling for Mr. Hamley, whose arm she pressed tenderly and daintily. But she was treading heavily on the younger man's foot all the while; and Sydney understood pantomime.

"I certainly did not mean to offend *you*, Miss Drummond," he said half sullenly, half familiarly.

"Nor Mr. Hamley," put in Dora. And there was another grind of the small high-heeled boot. "Mr. Hamley has been like my father all my life, and I owe him the love and obedience of a daughter." She looked prettily into his coarse, flushed face.

"Daughter be hanged!" said Mr. Hamley. "I hate rubbish, Dora, and you know it!"

"You surely do not mean to say that you regard Miss Drummond in any other light but that of a daughter!" flashed out Sydney.

"Mr. Lowe, sir, take my advice," said Mr. Hamley, measuring him with his eyes from head to foot, and mentally wringing his neck as he would have wrung any young cockerel's in his farmyard: "take stock of your own goods and chattels, and leave another man's alone."

Sydney's face and eyes flamed. "I suppose you know the only interpretation to that?" he said.

"As Miss Drummond is not your wife, if she is your 'chattel'——"

"What she is to me has nothing to do with you," interrupted Mr. Hamley. "Keep to your own side of the way, Mr. Lowe, and I'll keep to mine. There'll be mischief between us else, and I flatter myself I am a trifle the heavier metal!"

An imploring look from Dora checked the angry reply that rose to Sydney's lips. She liked it well enough that the two men should hate each other, and be held back from flying at each other's throats only by the force of conventionality, for her sake. She was of the order of woman to whom, though not personally cruel—quite the reverse—men fighting for her smiles was supreme honour and enjoyment. What they suffered in the conflict troubled her no more than it troubles the lioness who crouches, licking her lips and purring, waiting for the bleeding victor, indifferent whether it is the black lion or the tawny that will lie dead under the forest trees. But too much was involved at this moment in the keeping of peace to allow her to posturise as a prize for which men did well to contend; so literally as well as morally she brought pressure to bear on Sydney, and being the wiser and the stronger, she conquered. He ground his teeth together, but he

kept the torrent of words within them ; and making that peculiar grimace which goes by the name of a "sardonic grin," he turned to Dora, and said aloud in French, "Ce soir, chérie?" as compensation.

"What's that?" cried Mr. Hamley angrily, "Who's a-talking foreign tongues here?"

Sydney laughed unpleasantly. His laugh was naturally unpleasant.

"French," said Dora with her tender smile. "Soit!" with a look to Sydney; "it only means 'So be it.'"

"I think it deucedly ungentlemanly to talk your foreign lingo in society," Mr. Hamley answered, frowning. "Nowadays gentlemen do rum things, and where you'd look for manners most you find least. Now, Dora, come! We can't be here all day, and it's my belief we've been here too long already."

"Soit," repeated Sydney, taking the hint.

Spreading out both his hands, with two fingers bent inward, he made a meaningless pull at his coat.

Dora's hat needed adjusting. She put up her hand and pushed in a hair-pin with her forefinger. And the engagement stood for one o'clock

that night ; a meeting between them—where and how ?

Then they all took their leave ; and when they were gone the Colonel said, but not unkindly, “Syd, my boy, come with me to the library. We must have some serious talk, you and I.”

CHAPTER VI.

EXPLANATIONS.

“SHUT the door and sit down ; and now tell me—
what does all this mean ?” began the Colonel.

“What does all what mean, sir ?” answered
Sydney evasively.

“Don’t fence with me, Syd. We both understand
each other so far. But what I do not understand is,
your ultimate meaning—what you wish and what
you intend.”

“You are speaking in riddles this afternoon. If
you will come to the point, I will meet you,” said
Sydney.

His father smiled. “You would have made a
first-rate diplomatist,” he said.

“I wish to heaven you had put me into the
service, or done anything for me but keep me
knocking about at home !” cried Sydney impa-
tiently.

"You are ungrateful," was the Colonel's cool response. "Your idleness is your own doing, not mine. If parents are to be blamed for all the wrongheadedness of their sons, their score will be a pretty heavy one in these days of liberty and equality."

"Who cares for what a boy wishes!" said Sydney. "Boys know neither their own minds nor their best interests. Of what use are fathers and mothers but to guide their decisions? You should not have listened to me, sir!"

"Perhaps not," said Colonel Lowe, playing with a paper-knife carelessly. "But if I should not, *you* are not the person to tell me of it."

"And if not I, who then, pray?" answered Sydney. "I suppose it is more my affair than any other person's if my whole life is ruined that you may have had a plaything?"

"Drop that, sir!" cried the Colonel, turning round on him with sudden fierceness. "You ought to know by now what I can bear and what I will not, even from you. However, I have brought you here to reason, not to wrangle," he continued more quietly; "and wrangling is caddish. Tell me, what are you proposing to yourself with respect to Miss Drummond?"

"I don't know that I am proposing anything to myself with respect to Miss Drummond," answered Sydney sulkily.

"Then you are making a fool of her? All right I dare say, if a trifle cruel. She is probably worth nothing better at the hands of a gentleman—parvenues seldom are."

"Parvenue or not, she is worth more than all your Ladies and Honourables put together. Any man might be proud of Miss Drummond!" flashed out Sydney, falling headlong into the trap.

"All right on the other side," said the Colonel.

"And you are not making a fool of her?"

"I am not," answered his son.

"In which case you are meditating an offer?"

"I did not say so," he replied.

"Perhaps have already made it?"

"Neither did I say that," said Sydney.

"I am glad of your disclaimers, my dear boy. As things are with us, any intentions—of an honourable kind—with respect to Miss Drummond, would be decidedly *mal à propos*. For the rest, she must take care of herself."

"My dear father," said Sydney with an impertinent smile, "perhaps we shall come to a better understanding together if you will stick to facts

and take nothing for granted. It is only women who jump to conclusions from insufficient premises."

"Thanks for the lesson in dialectics," said the Colonel. "Facts then it shall be: and I will begin with one I would willingly have spared you. I and you are both ruined."

The craven spirit of the man went down. He turned as white as Dora might have done, and his very lips were pale.

"Ruined! you are surely joking, sir!" he gasped.

"I wish I was," said the Colonel quietly.

"But what am I to do?" cried Sydney. Then by the grace of an after-thought he added, "what are we all to do?"

"What you have to do is to marry money, by which we shall all profit," said the father.

"All very well to say marry money," said Sydney, looking at his nails. "That is sooner said than done."

"Not at all: it is waiting for you. Julia Manley would jump at you. This I know for a fact; and she has money enough in all conscience—five thousand a year."

"A woman like a camel!—with sandy hair and freckles!" said Sydney in a tone of disgust.

"Golden hair, my boy, and beauty spots—with five thousand a year to gild them."

"Not to me, sir. She is hideous; and if she was Miss Kilmansegg herself she would be hideous all the same."

"Oh! after a year's marriage all women are pretty much alike," said his father: "excepting, indeed, that the odds are in favour of the plain ones. They wear the best and want less looking after in all ways. Five thousand a year will make Julia Manley's camel's face prettier than Dora Drummond's wax-doll beauty, with not fivepence to give it consistency. You will see. A nice house and plenty of cash, and she will be quite handsome in your eyes before your heir is born. And good temper and habit will do the rest."

"All very well, I dare say, if one entered into the thing quite free; but—I had better confess it now—I *am* in love with Dora Drummond," said Sydney with a burst.

"Of not the slightest consequence, my dear fellow. Many a man before yourself has loved one woman by inclination and married another by necessity. I have not the faintest objection to your loving Hamley's pretty little girl, but I bar the banns. Unless," he shrugged his shoulders and cut

a sheet of paper carelessly, "you are prepared to turn into the world on your own account, without a halfpenny from me, present or to come."

"But why is Miss Drummond to be tabooed of all women?" said Sydney. "She is pretty, lady-like, well-bred, and I am fond of her; why is she to be thrust out into the cold?"

"She is not tabooed; it is only her want of money that won't fit. Let Hamley give her only two thousand a year, and I say amen with all my heart. You see I rate her, as woman with woman, worth three thousand a year more than Julia Manley; which is ranking her high. But if, as I suspect, it is your pretty Dora and an empty purse, I say no, unless you have resources of which I know nothing."

"At least let me try," said Sydney dejectedly.

"Like Bruce's spider? By all means. And if you fail?"

The young man was silent.

"Well! if you fail, what then, Syd?" his father repeated.

"I am sure I don't know," he answered sullenly.

"No? I do. Your decision will rest then between two alternatives—marrying Julia Manley, or hopeless and irremediable ruin."

"I suppose Cragfoot will stand where it does?" said Sydney.

"Probably; but not for us. It is mortgaged up to the hilt. I tell you, Syd," he continued earnestly, "we are ruined; and I see no way out of the wood save by Julia Manley."

"At least, I will try old Hamley first," said Sydney, suddenly changing colour.

"By all means. You won't succeed. It's my belief he has his own reason for keeping that girl single."

"What the deuce do you mean, sir?" cried Sydney irritably. "If I thought that I would break his head."

"You had better keep your hands clean," said Colonel Lowe. "Perhaps he is looking out for a title, and means to sell her only when he has made his market. There's Merrian. The old shoeblack may be ambitious of getting his name in Debrett; or he may be looking forward to Mrs. Hamley's death. She is tough, but he's twenty years her junior, if a day."

"Don't say that, father; it maddens me!" cried Sydney passionately. "I swear to you, if I believed that he had designs on Dora in the future, I would take her away to-night!"

"Don't be a fool, Syd," returned his father. "Take the girl away to what?—absolute beggary! You would find no home here, and you have no income in your hands or your head. Let us understand one another. It is time. I have been an indulgent father to you, but everything has its limits. Mine is, your marrying a penniless parvenue. If you were to do so, I swear, in my turn, that you might starve before my eyes before I would give you a crust; and if I came into millions not one sixpence would be left to you. You know, Syd, I am never violent, but I am determined. And now you have it."

"Your words are hard, sir," said Sydney, looking down.

With much bluster he had but little of the tenacity of a real fighter in him. A tyrant over subordinates, he was a coward when a resolute will opposed him; and his father—who, to do him justice, hated the task—knew he could bully him into submission whenever he chose to assume a certain tone which meant he was not to be trifled with.

"If my words are hard my deeds will be harder," said Colonel Lowe.

"Still, I have yet permission to do my best with that brute?" said Sydney after a pause; during

which, handsome though he was, he had a curious kind of likeness to a rat in a trap.

"By all means. And when you have done your best, come to me and tell me the result."

"And if Mr. Hamley refuses?—father! I do love her!"

"I shall be sorry for you. But he will refuse; and then you must marry Julia Manley."

"If he consents so far as to give very little down, and to make only a provisional settlement—you will not oppose me then?"

The Colonel smiled, and yet half sadly. He thought his son would have shown more pluck, more determination, than this pitiful trying here and there for a way of escape. He was sorry for him, but he was contemptuous too.

"I will say amen to any scheme you can propose, my dear fellow, that will give you a gentleman's income and pay fifty thousand pounds over and above your immediate wants," he said. "Get even a thousand a year with your pretty Dora, and I will not refuse my consent; which is being liberal."

"I will go to Abbey Holme to-morrow," said Sydney; but he did not speak confidently, and his father knew that his hopes were as few as his own.

"All right," he answered. "Now let us go and

have a game at billiards. Ah! if you could do everything as well as your favourite hazard, you would not have far to go for your fortune."

"It is a pity you did not teach me something more profitable while there was time," retorted Sydney, as they lighted their cigars and strolled smoking towards the billiard-room.

While this conversation had been going on at Cragfoot, the Hamley carriage, bearing its four silent occupants, had been rolling rapidly to the Quest. It was by no means a comfortable drive. Things never are comfortable when Fear sits on one side and Nemesis on the other.

At the Quest they found the Countess and Lord Merrian both at home. The Earl was out with his agent, looking over the land. They saw him afterwards in the road; a stout-legged, ruddy-faced man, in a bulky shooting-jacket and leathern gaiters, looking like a well-to-do grazier rather than a man of fashion or an hereditary legislator consecrated by birth to patriotism and the public service. He was too well known by sight to the others for them to wonder at his unaristocratic look; but Patricia was immensely astonished at his commonplace appearance. She had an idea that Lords and Ladies were of different material from the rest

of the world ; and that nature herself had delivered them visibly from the bondage of mediocrity and endowed them with their superior credentials.

But if the Earl was homely the Countess was superb—the typical countess of splendid attire, magnificent beauty, queenly manners, and looking about thirty when she was fifteen years older. Lord Merrian too, was delightful. He was a tall, poetic-looking, handsome young man, well-mannered, superbly got-up, a trifle affected, but both clever and ambitious ; at this moment going through a temporary phase of intellectual conscientiousness, by which he did honestly desire to know the truth and live up to the better thing, without having the moral thoroughness which would enable him to do either. He was an imaginative person, who took impressions for convictions and fancies for proofs ; not of strong character, and apt to be unduly influenced by his surroundings ; which gave him an undeserved appearance of insincerity. He professed to take mournful views of life and to be penetrated with a sense of the general hollowness of things. A mild sceptic on his own account, and with no definite creed on any side, he deplored the absence of faith in the masses ; a Conservative, holding to the righteousness of a privileged class, he deplored

their degradation ; rich—at least absolutely, if relatively poor for a peer's son—titled, courted, and a social darling of the most cherished kind, he yearned for a crusade, he said, where men would go out to fight for some great stirring cause, flinging off the deadening fetters of society and the silken cordage of our modern luxury.

It was pretty and pathetic to hear him talk thus, lowering his soft voice and raising his handsome eyes in between the rare Steinberger and the 'twenty-seven port ; his smooth young face arranged with care, his costly button-hole bouquet shedding sweet scents with every breath, the ball at his foot, and in his hand every good gift by which humanity can be blessed and life made happy. Women praised him for his earnestness, and called him "a sweet fellow" and a "most charming young man, with such nice feeling" and "such good sentiments ;" men laughed at him for his affectation and called him a humbug and a sop. But he was not a humbug. He was theoretically in earnest ; only practically he had not enough force to defy the world, deny himself, and act out his higher faith in the face of the society he affected to decry. His was not the stuff of which martyrs are made ; and while he looked towards Pisgah carried

daily sacrifice to Mammon. But it soothed his conscience that he should talk; and he did not feel saddened by the hiatus between his word and his deed.

His manner of being and his style of conversation pleased the Abbey Holme girls. Naturally he devoted himself to them during the visit, the three sitting in a recess a little apart from the rest—Lord Merrian holding forth. He was fond of drawing-room declamation, and especially fond of declaiming in a corner with a few pretty women as his audience. To Dora he was of course delightful. Was he not a young lord, well-looking and gallant? and did not his handsome eyes rest on her with a kind of approving admiration that showed his cultivated taste? To Patricia, still in the age of candid credulity, he was a nineteenth-century Saint John. His second-hand Emersonian turns of thought and modes of expression struck a chord in her own heart that vibrated with a passionate echo. Her face lighted up as Lord Merrian spoke of the valuelessness of the individual and the grandeur of truth, of the need for self-sacrifice and the sorrows of humanity. She felt inclined to hold out her hand to him and call him brother. Had she been a man she would have proposed a league between them on the spot, by which they would have bound them-

selves like knights of old to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to devote themselves to the good of humanity and the glory of God. Being a woman, all she could do was to raise her large eyes, dilated, dark, and tender, to his face, and to assent to his views with an outflow of enthusiasm that partly stirred and partly amused him. He thought what a grand creature she was; just the kind of woman to lead a man to the ultimate heights, and make him a hero or a saint, according to his bent and the development of his muscles. A little untutored perhaps; but too lovely not to be forgiven this or any other flaw there might be in her crown of perfection. He was charmed with her. She was so fresh, he said to his mother afterwards; so deliciously quaint and simple; a girl who reminded him of an early Christian martyr, or of Hypatia, or Vittoria Colonna; and he too added what Colonel Lowe had said—or Joan of Arc.

Of Dora he formed another estimate, but one as true in its own way. A clever, self-controlled woman, he said, leading an artificial life and wearing a mask, not a face; a woman to fence with, to play with, to be wary of; one of the *felidæ*—soft, silky, stealthy, creeping—but trustworthy? true? real? Scarcely!

Lord Merrian had not come to the mature age of three-and-twenty without learning a few facts of human life, and the Doras of the world of women were not unfamiliar to him.

Patricia on the contrary was a new study ; and the young man's curiosity was roused, as Dr. Fletcher's had been before him. He mentally determined that he would see this noble creature again before long, that he would make himself a hero in her eyes, and rouse her enthusiasm as he felt it could be roused. After that he was conscious of nothing ; save perhaps a vague idea that Mr. Hamley was popularly supposed to possess millions, and that Patricia Kemball was his wife's niece.

On the whole, the visit was a success. The Countess was gracious in bearing and gorgeously arrayed ; and Lord Merrian was pronounced a most distinguished-looking young man by Mrs. Hamley, and not so far amiss by Mr. Hamley. Mrs. Hamley felt when they left that she had made a decided step upwards, and had planted herself at last in the same hemisphere as her desires. She was convinced that they would be asked to the Quest this year ; and when that was done, the last huis clos would be thrown down, the last stronghold of exclusiveness would have surrendered.

As they drove home she was quite gay, almost playful; and even Patricia came in for a share in the wintry sun of her smiles. Both she and Mr. Hamley had seen that Lord Merrian had paid her just that extra amount of attention which implies preference, and for the moment she was in the ascendant, and had "the hands" usually accorded to Dora.

For the moment indeed, the two girls seemed to have changed places. Grim to Dora, Mr. Hamley was quite familiar and jocular with Patricia. He "chaffed" her about the conquest, and called her "my lady" all the way home, till the girl's burning indignation nearly choked her. He rolled his eyes and wagged his head and smacked his lips as he said, "Oh! I saw, Miss Slyboots, what game you were after!" or "Well, my Lady Merrian, and when are we to order the bride-cake, eh?" or "When a certain young lady's queening it at the Quest, I suppose she'll be too grand for you and me, Lady," and so on, with never a softening line in his face in answer to dear Dora's shy eyes and tender smiles and pretty lisp, and all those subtle, secret caresses of hers which generally had the power of putting him into a good humour when he was cross, and of making life very sweet and pleasant to him.

To-day he was impervious. Her tenderest looks

fell on him like dew on granite, and softened him no more than the dew would have softened the granite. He had not got over the scene at Cragfoot, and he had to have it out with her, as he said to himself, before he forgave her. Besides, though Lord Merrian had paid Patricia the most attention to outsiders, he had looked at Dora admiringly; and Mr. Hamley was well up in the science of secret preference, and by what methods it could be shown. Just before they came to Abbey Holme he took occasion to say, speaking of Lord Merrian, "Yes; I'm no tuft-hunter, I believe,"—he was, though he did not acknowledge it—"but I could not help observing the difference between this young man and that young hound, Lowe. I have lived pretty long among gentlefolks, but hang me if ever I saw one as impudent as that jackanapes was to-day. However you could permit him to address you as he did, Dora, is more than I can make out. It is that that gets over me. To call you 'Dora' before my very face! I should like to have wrung his neck for him!"

"It was very rude, very extraordinary!" murmured Dora meekly. "I could not make it out; he never did so before."

"And I'll take pretty good care he never does so

again," said Mr. Hamley. "I'll Dora him if he tries it on again, he may take his oath of that!"

"I am sure I do not know what possessed him to-day. He must have been out of his mind!" said Dora with a distressed face.

"He was drunk," said Mr. Hamley coarsely.

And Dora turned her head out of the window, saying between her teeth "Wretch!" quite naturally.

"I thought he was, rather free," put in Mrs. Hamley, looking kindly at her favourite. "But I don't see how Dora could have helped it. I don't think you encouraged him, my dear?"

"Oh, no, indeed I did not, dear!" said Dora pleadingly. "I was as much astonished at it as you could have been. I *never* encouraged Mr. Lowe—never!"

Patricia put her hand over her eyes. Her burning indignation at Mr. Hamley's ungainly playfulness to herself suddenly died out, and she became chilled, as if the air had grown colder than before, when she heard Dora's deliberate untruth. She knew that Sydney Lowe had been encouraged; did she not remember that walk, and all those long, half-whispered and wholly unintelligible conversations together? She wondered how Dora could have

the courage—the bad courage—to say such a thing so unblushingly before her.

“I saw how much annoyed you were,” continued Dora, turning her eyes meekly on her master; “and I would have given worlds to have stopped him. But I could not! and I was so dreadfully distressed!”

It was getting dark now. Leaning forward to impress her grief more closely on Mr. Hamley, Dora slid her soft, caressing little hand into his; and Mr. Hamley, squeezing it—forgave her.

“I think you were hard on Dora to-day,” said Mrs. Hamley, as she and her husband sat before the fire in her dressing-room, waiting for the dressing-bell to ring. “It is only what we must expect; she is a pretty girl, and young men will pay her attention, of course. That young Mr. Lowe—I have often thought he admired her; and though Lord Merrian paid Patricia the most attention, still he looked very often at Dora, and he might have talked more to my niece as a blind. Young people will be young people; and though I do not encourage flirting, or anything undesirable, we must expect that the girl will be sought after.”

“I don’t want young men about Miss Drummond,” answered Mr. Hamley. “I have brought

her up at great expense to be one of ourselves, and I do not relish the idea of having spent all that money for another man's advantage. We are getting old people, my dear,"—when Mr. Hamley wanted to please his wife he used to bracket himself with her, and deny his comparative youth in favour of her age—"and being old people, or on the way, Dora is useful to us. She makes a little life in the house, and she is nice in her ways, and so on."

"Good gracious, Mr. Hamley, we have Patricia!" said Mrs. Hamley sharply. "She is younger than Dora."

"And not half so entertaining," said Mr. Hamley. "Your niece may be a good sort of young person; I do not deny that; but she is horrid heavy on hand all the same. She can't do the things Dora can. I call her a wretched performer on the piano, and she has no manner, as Dora has."

"She has not had Dora's advantages, of course," said Mrs. Hamley. "No girl brought up as poor Patricia has been can possibly be equal to one cared for and educated by a lady, like Dora. For what she has gone through I consider her remarkable; and at all events she is a Kembell, which counts for something."

"She ought to be able to count something to the good," Mr. Hamley answered. "But make the best of it you can, you cannot make her a patch on Dora."

"I hate such vulgar expressions!" said Mrs. Hamley crossly.

"Well, it isn't quite the thing perhaps," apologized her husband; "but I mean to say you know what I am at."

"To go back to our starting-point, you say you don't wish Dora to marry?" asked Mrs. Hamley.

She had her idea, and she was resolved to ventilate it before dinner.

"Certainly not. I can leave her comfortable," said the brewer decidedly.

"But I suppose you would not refuse a good offer; say such an offer as Lord Merrian for the girl?" Mrs. Hamley said this loftily—lords were becoming her everyday acquaintance now.

"Wouldn't I just?—all the same as if he was that blackguard young Lowe yonder, or the stable-boy," Mr. Hamley answered, a little more roughly than was usual with him when "conversing" with his wife. "Lord or no lord, I'll have none of them here poking after the girl. I've paid for her bringing up, and I consider I have the right to keep

what I've paid for. I've heard speak of pelicans, but I don't feel inclined to copy 'em."

"It is rather a novel way of looking at the matter, and I must say a sordid one," said Mrs. Hamley. "I cannot think with you that in adopting a child you are buying a slave."

"Don't you?" he answered coolly. "I'm sorry we cannot put our horses' heads together in the matter. But whether we do or we don't, I must be leader here, Lady; and if I leave you full possession of your own to do as you like with, you have no cause of complaint. If you are so anxious to get the young ladies a husband with a handle to his name, get him for Miss Kemball. I'll give her as handsome a turn-out and make as good a settlement on her if she marries to please me—and you—as any girl need have. And I'm sure I can't say fairer for a young person as is no relation to me, and that I don't especially admire."

"You are the oddest compound of generosity and tyranny, Mr. Hamley, I ever saw!" said his wife, half pettishly, half pleasantly; for they had their little conjugal flirtations together when they were alone. At first for policy; but as time had gone on, and Mrs. Hamley had followed the law of habit, she had become both more oblivious to her husband's

defects and more tolerant of those she still saw, as well as personally more affectionate to him. His strength and vigour seemed to stay her own failing powers, and she leant on him more than she had done in the beginning; while he was daily more conscious of the twenty years' gap between them, if daily more careful to conceal that consciousness and go through his appointed task creditably.

"Ah, my dear," he answered, his thick lips parted into what he meant to be a fascinating smile, and his small keen eyes turned with such softness as he could command on his aged wife. "I would do more for you than take your niece into my house, and treat her like my own. What I did for my cousin's child I can surely do for your brother's daughter; for though I am but a rough diamond, Lady, I never forget who you are and what I owe you. You have chipped me out of the rough, as I may say, and I don't begrudge my thanks."

"You are very good," said his wife softly, and stroked his thick hand almost tenderly with her long bony fingers.

Poor soul, she meant it well, though she did make his flesh creep.

"There! I think I have settled the old lady's hash for a bit," was his unspoken thought as, the

dressing-bell ringing, he stooped over her gallantly and kissed her powdered flaccid cheek. Then he went into his own room and stood before the glass, fingering his bushy whiskers complacently.

And standing there, large, florid, black-haired, showy, he smiled approvingly at the thing he saw.

"A fine figure of a man when all's said and done!" he said to himself. "I don't know a finer!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE POSTERN GATE.

THIS conversation, wherein he had been able to lay down the law and set his foot on the budding head of the young scorpion—the thought was his own—restored Mr. Hamley to his wonted self-satisfaction. Perhaps that survey in the glass had something to do with it. The evening therefore passed off with an amount of cheerfulness not usual in the evenings at Abbey Holme. The three played their beloved *béziq*ue, and the good humour of the trio did not suffer by any of the accidents of the game. Patricia was “out,” of course; but she was not snubbed as usual. Indeed Aunt Hamley made room for her to come and sit by her, and tried, as so often before, to teach her the mysteries of royal and common marriage, single and double *béziq*ue, sequence, and tens and aces. And Patricia for very gratitude gave her mind to it,

and did her best to understand it, but could not get beyond the length of thinking it all an incomprehensible muddle, and nothing in it when you had got to the end of it. Still she was happy in feeling in favour; happy in thinking that a man in Lord Merrian's position, with his wealth and power, could hold such grand views and be so entirely noble-minded; happy in the remembrance of some poor people for whom she had given Catherine Fletcher a contribution out of her small store the other day, and to whom this timely help had been of infinite service; happy in having seen by a *Times* telegram that Gordon's ship, the *Arrow*, had got safely to her first station, and that she might therefore be soon expecting a letter; and in the general amiability of the time even Mr. Hamley thought her really a very nice-looking young person, and not so bad a girl after all.

As for dear Dora, she was so sweet and pretty, so animated yet so gentle, with such a lovely flush on her round, pink cheeks, and "so darling" altogether, he wondered how he could have been such a bear to her to-day. And yet when he remembered Sydney Lowe, and that odd-looking scene in the conservatory, he did not find his bearishness so very remarkable. Of one thing however, he was

quite sure—whatever that young jackanapes might feel, dear Dora thought nothing of him, and she would not, even if she was asked, leave Abbey Holme : and Mrs. Hamley.

Abbey Holme was a large house, thickly carpeted throughout, and with well-oiled locks and hinges. Doors and windows were all heavily bolted and barred, but neither bolt nor bar made more noise than the piston of a steam-engine, and everything worked with a silent precision that was part of the Hamley luxury of living. Only one door was not barred with extra bolts. This was a low-arched, oaken door, studded and banded with iron in a fantastic mediæval fashion that looked formidable and was of no use ; a kind of make-believe postern-gate, opening on to the side shrubbery for show only, for it was never used. Indeed, the key had been abstracted from Mr. Hamley's private drawer for nearly three years now ; but he had not missed it. Such a mere symbol as it was he had forgotten it had ever been.

But there was one person in the house to whom that key was no mere symbol, but a thing of very positive use. Nearly three years ago Dora had purloined it, and thus had held her freedom of nights, if not of days, in her own hands. And for the last

year she had used her freedom in company with Mr. Sydney Lowe.

Once a week or so, when the Abbey Holme household was asleep, a little figure muffled up in a waterproof, hooded and veiled, used to open the third door on the corridor and steal down the broad staircase, with no more noise of swinging hinge or falling feet than if a ghost had been abroad ; used to glide across the hall, every step counted till the nailed and banded door was reached ; used to feel with small, pink hands for the keyhole, putting in the key and shooting the lock with about as much sound as the scratching and the falling of a pin would have made ; used to draw the key ; stand for a moment on the top step ; and then on a cry which only her ear could have distinguished from the hoot of an owl, used to steal round the angle into the dark walk where Sydney Lowe was waiting for her. This had gone on as was said for over a year now, and no human being had the smallest suspicion of the truth.

To be sure Alice Garth, Dora's maid, used sometimes to wonder how her young mistress's waterproof had got so wet when she was not out all yesterday ; but she had no theory to explain the wonder, and contented herself with thinking it

queer and talking it over in the housekeeper's room. Twice, when she had spoken of it, some of the servants had set themselves to watch the young lady's door; but as each time it was on the night after she had gone out—when she was naturally safe at home—they had lost half a night's rest for nothing; and the mystery remained unsolved. If they had waited for a week or so, and had been as persevering as they were anxious, they might have been rewarded.

To-night it all happened just as usual. Exactly at one o'clock Dora turned the handle of her door, and came out into the corridor. She was dressed in her dark grey cloak, with the hood over her head and a thick veil over her face. Brown woollen socks were drawn over her boots, and she had sacrificed high heels to the exigencies of the expedition. The moon shone brightly; and she was always a little nervous in the moonlight. Indeed she was disturbed altogether to-night; strangely so for her, generally so cool, so collected, and with no more nervous fancies than she had inconvenient passions. She felt as if a crisis was at hand; and she dreaded lest it should turn the wrong way and bring her ruin, not relief.

Besides, she was getting tired of her part. More because of the dead weariness of her life than be-

cause she loved him with that intensity of passion which defies all law and conquers all obstacles, and more as her expression of revolt against the tyrannous domination to which she outwardly submitted so gracefully than as a matter of deliberate choice, she had entered into these secret relations with Sydney Lowe. And now when she was irrevocably caught she was beginning to long for freedom. Lord Merrian had looked at her admiringly to-day; and to be Lady Merrian, and later the Countess of Dovedale, was as a fool's bauble that jingled its bells merrily in her ears. To be Mrs. Sydney Lowe by consent of the authorities had once seemed to her by no means a disagreeable outlook; but she was getting weary of the uncertainty of that consent, and the first excitement of her adventure had passed. And again, in spite of all that had happened, she did not so very madly love the man; she could have lived without him, had she tried, she thought! His admiration had flattered, and his own love for her in its fiery insistence had excited and carried her away. She had been dull and oppressed; always playing a part and always humbling herself in submission; so she had oiled the bolts and hinges of the postern-gate, and had used the key to more purpose of late than when she had merely

played at being adventurous and secretly free in the beginning.

At the first it had been simply running half-a-dozen steps into the shrubbery and back again, feeling awfully wicked, immeasurably brave, and desperately frightened; grateful too that no big black man had come out of the darkness and caught her by the heels as she scampered up the steps panting and trembling; and congratulating herself on her safety when she had crept up into her own room again, and felt herself the mistress of the whole sleeping household. These had been her first experiences in the way of midnight sorties. Then she had ventured a little farther; and once into the high road over the stile—the vulnerable point of the park—where, as ill-luck would have it, she had met a real adventure in the person of Sydney Lowe, himself out at that hour for no good; a meeting to be henceforth continued by appointment, and on to the position in which affairs stood at present. And they stood awkwardly enough; could scarcely be worse, all things considered—Colonel Lowe's ruin, and Mr. Hamley's determination not to give dear Dora a farthing if she married against his wish, and Sydney Lowe being of all men the one most decidedly against his wish.

"Dora! I have been waiting for you more than an hour," said Sydney, more peevishly than tenderly, as she glided across the walk and ran into his arms.

"Poor dear boy! I am so sorry! But I said one quite plainly, you know. I could not be sure of myself before," said Dora prettily.

Not even to Sydney Lowe did she ever show temper or her real self. The concealment of her real feelings under a false mask of amiability had come to be a kind of second nature with her, and she liked the sentiment of strength and of an inner unknown and unshared life that it gave her.

"But I wanted so much to see you, darling! I suppose that made me impatient," he said.

"Well, and now that you have me, what?" asked Dora.

"Dora, I and my father have had a jaw," Sydney began.

"You horrid boy—a what?" said Dora.

"Oh, never mind grammar, Dody!—let me say what I have to say in my own way!" cried Sydney. "My father has been talking to me, and it is all over with us!"

"What do you mean, Syd?—has he found out?" Dora cried, clinging to him in terror.

"Quite the contrary; he has no idea of the

real state of the case, though I have told him something; but the game's up all the same. The governor has done something, I don't know what, but the upshot of it is—he is ruined and we have not sixpence between us.”

“Sydney!” The pretty little head went down on to his shoulder, and Dora, whom this prospect of impecuniosity appalled, began to cry.

“Don't cry, darling!” he said soothingly. “What's done cannot be undone, and things may come right after all!”

“How can they come right?” she sobbed.

“I don't see exactly; perhaps old Hamley will come down handsomely. I am going to ask him to-morrow. That made me so anxious to see you to-night.”

“Oh Sydney, you must not ask him!” she pleaded. “Things are bad enough as they are; this will only make them ten times worse.”

“But why should it make them worse, Dora? I must ask him some day. We cannot go on as we are. I swear it makes me almost mad!—and we cannot live without money.”

“And do you think he will give us a farthing? Not if we starved. Married or unmarried he will not help us with sixpence. I know Mr. Hamley!”

said Dora lifting her head—the moonlight shining on her tears—and speaking with a bitterness rare in her.

“That is just what my father said I might do if I brought you without money,” Sydney returned. “If old Hamley comes down as he ought he will receive you with open arms. He has taken quite a liking for you, Dora—and who indeed could help it, my beauty?—but he cannot give us what he has not got; and he has not got enough to go on with for himself, still less to set me up. The thing now is to get old Hamley to do it.”

“Get him to set us up!—ask that stone, and you are just as likely to move it as Mr. Hamley,” said Dora. “He does not want me to marry at all!”

“And why not?” said Sydney passionately, unclasping her hands from his shoulders and standing as if in another moment he would fling her from him.

He was not a brave man, but he would have fought for a woman like a tiger, or with one like a savage; and he was jealous.

“I don’t know,” lisped Dora. “How can I tell? I am useful to him at home, I suppose, and he does not want to part with me; still less with his money.”

"If I thought it was anything else I would break every bone in his body," flared out Sydney.

"What a silly boy you are, Syd!" said Dora. "Cannot a person be fond of one without being in love? Why, Mr. Hamley is old enough to be my father!"

"And his wife to be your grandmother," returned Sydney.

"Poor dear, yes; quite that," laughed Dora.

"Which is just the reason. It is you, Dora, who are silly."

"You are complimentary," she pouted.

"And you are unkind," he returned.

"If you have brought me out into the cold, such a frosty night as it is too, only to quarrel with me, I shall go in again," said Dora, suddenly and strangely cross.

He stared at her. This was a new revelation to him. His "little bit of swansdown," as he used to call her, cross! his soft sleek purring felis femina suddenly ceasing to purr and showing her claws! It was the beginning of a new order of things, and one that Sydney Lowe was not disposed to accept.

"Perhaps you had better," he answered coolly. "And perhaps I had better not come to Mr. Hamley to-morrow."

"How cruel you are, Sydney!" she cried. "After having got me into such a dreadful scrape talking like that!—and when you ought to do everything in the world to get me out of it again—as far as you can. It is too bad of you!"

"But you said it was of no use, Dora." His tone was still that of an offended person.

"And if I did, does that say you are not to try? We cannot be worse off than we are!" she answered.

"Oh yes, we might," said Sydney significantly.

And Dora laughing, said, "Yes, a great deal worse if it all came out, and we were forced to take up our position and keep to it. But, Sydney," she continued, "what shall we do if Mr. Hamley will not give his consent, which means money?"

"Take French leave, Dody."

"I think we have done that already," she said demurely.

"Well, I am sure I cannot tell. We must go on like this, I suppose," Sydney said, biting his nails according to his habit.

"It is dreadful, dear, is it not?" said Dora; "but indeed I see nothing else for it. We cannot live on love and kisses, Syd; we must have a house to shelter us, and clothes to wear, and food to

eat, and these are only to be had for money. And we cannot earn money—we must have it given to us somehow.”

“Then I will come to-morrow,” said Sydney, taking her in his arms again as the last remains of their little tiff vanished.

“And be very sweet and nice,” answered Dora. “You are a dear boy, but you were like a bear to-day—just a bear,” pulling his curly locks playfully.

“I cannot help it, Dora. That man maddens me with his vulgarity. He is such a cad, and so insolently familiar to you! I feel as if I could thrust my fist down his throat when he calls you ‘Dora,’ and speaks as if you belonged to him—conceited jack-ass!”

“Yes, I know all that; but he has the key of the position, dear, and there is no good to be got by making him angry. Our policy is to please him,” was her sagacious reply.

“Little wisehead! when you are always with me I shall be a paragon of perfection.”

Sydney said this with that curious mixture of banter and affection which belongs to a vain man in love when the woman he loves schools him. He did not like it, but he liked her, and so made the two fit in the best way he could.

She chose to take him simpliciter.

"Yes," she said, with her hands on his shoulders ;
"when you have me with you always, you will be
different from what you are now."

"What the—what in the name of fortune do you
mean?" cried Sydney.

"Just what I say, dear. Betting and drinking
and smoking, and oh! a world of other things—and
swearing with them—all these will have to be given
up when I am at Cragfoot."

"Do you want your husband to be a muff?" he
asked.

"Not the least in the world—only a gentleman,"
replied Dora.

"I must either quarrel with you or kiss you for
that piece of impertinence," he said.

"Are you in doubt which?" asked Dora, lifting
her eyes shyly and lisping.

When Dora stole back to the house she was con-
scious of something unusual. Lights were flashing
up-stairs, and a subdued hum of voices told that the
trim household was up and about, and that an event
must have taken place in her absence. If it should
be that she had been missed! Quick as thought she
drew off her socks and stole across the hall to the
library, the door of which she opened, then came

running up the stairs rubbing her eyes like one just awakened. She saw no one, however, until she came to her own room, where Patricia, pale and tall as an avenging angel, met her at the door.

"Oh, my goodness! what is the matter?" cried Dora.

"Aunt Hamley has been taken ill and has been asking for you. Why, Dora, where have you been?"

"I went into the library to read a little bit of German I wanted to translate, and fell asleep. I am so cold—feel me," Dora answered, putting her benumbed hands into Patricia's.

"But how is that? I went into the library—I went into all the rooms for you," she answered. "We could not find you anywhere; and, Dora, I saw something that I know now was you cross the shrubbery path, and that horrid Mr. Lowe was with you. Oh, I am so sorry to say this to you," she continued, as Dora started and trembled and looked as if she was going to faint; "you know how much I love you! Dora, I would rather have done a wrong thing myself than that you should! I would rather have died than have seen this!—but I cannot live in falsehood, and what I know you must know that I know."

The tears gushed into her eyes and her lips quivered.

For just a moment Dora reflected; then she took her determination.

"Don't cry," she said. "Things look bad, but they are not so bad as they seem. You did see me with Sydney, but there is no harm in it—I am married to him."

"Married! Dora!—oh, it cannot be true!" said Patricia, putting up her hands.

The thought seemed indelicate, monstrous, almost criminal, sacrilegious. A married woman was a very different thing from a girl playfellow, even if she was seven years older than herself. A married woman was a person infinitely older, infinitely experienced, set in a different sphere, with thoughts and views and knowledge quite apart from all girlhood—a person to approach with respect; to wonder at while her wedding-ring was yet bright and fresh; perhaps to pity; perhaps to envy; maybe to regard as a traitress to the order of maidenhood; maybe as the fortunate chosen into a more beautiful existence—certainly not to treat with the foolish familiarity allowed to one of her own kind, and with which she had treated Dora. She drew back, shocked, chilled, terrified, revolted. She

had loved Dora so much, and now to find herself so fearfully deceived !

"Don't be shocked, dear," said Dora, creeping up to her caressingly. "It was very wrong and silly, I dare say ; but he made me do it when I was in London last autumn."

"No, Dora, no one can make you commit a crime," said Patricia, her head and eyes still averted.

"A secret marriage is not a crime, dear. Sydney is my husband," said Dora, humbly if emphatically.

"The marriage may not be, but the secrecy is. I cannot think how you can live with such a thing on your mind," Patricia answered, still turned away.

"It is horrible, but what can I do ? There it is, and I cannot get out of it ; and the worst is, his father is ruined, and Mr. Hamley, I know, will give me neither his consent nor a fraction. Colonel Lowe would like me well enough for a daughter-in-law if there was any money on either side ; but, as Sydney says, we have not sixpence between us."

"But, Dora, this must come to an end now ; you must decide on something. What are you going to do ?" cried Patricia, suddenly looking at her.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "What can we do ?" she said.

"Tell Mr. and Mrs. Hamley ; and if you don't——"

"You will ? No, Patricia, you will not," she said, putting her arms round her and looking up into her face. "I know your good heart too well for that. You would not ruin me ; you are not my enemy, darling. I can trust you, and you would never be treacherous to me or take advantage of having found out my secret."

Tears gathered into Patricia's eyes, and fell slowly down her face.

"Would you ?" said Dora, with a tender, suppliant, loving air ; her arms still round the girl's waist, clinging closer and closer.

Patricia did not answer. She made a faint and ineffectual show of unclasping those beseeching arms.

"Patricia !" the soft voice pleaded again ; "will you betray me ? If you do, you send me out to simple beggary ; and I have always been your friend here."

Still Patricia did not answer. She had covered her face now and was sobbing.

"Patricia !"—almost in a whisper—"Patricia, dear, will you betray me ? If you think you ought you must—but I shall be ruined."

A step, or rather the rustle of a dress, was heard in the lobby.

"Speak, darling—tell me!"

"No, no; I will not betray you!" said Patricia, turning to her, sobbing as if her heart would break. She carried the sacrifice of her truth to her love, and accounted herself accursed that her friend might be saved.

A light knock came to the door.

"Mrs. Hamley is wanting you, Miss Drummond," said Bignold the maid.

"Good gracious, Bignold! what is the matter?" said dear Dora through the closed door, tearing down her chignon and flinging a shawl about her to look as if she had just scrambled out of bed.

"Spasms, miss. Your aunt is very bad," said Bignold; and then Dora opened the door and slid out as if just awakened.

"It was only to say you need not be alarmed; and do not wake up Patricia," said Mrs. Hamley feebly.

"No, dear, I will not," Dora answered, kissing her forehead. "It is quite enough that I am unhappy. How sorry I am to see you suffer like this!"

Mrs. Hamley smiled; she meant it tenderly, but

the effect was ghastly—and Mr. Hamley, on the other side of the bed, thought it so.

“Dear sweet child!” she said fondly. “What a comfort you are to me, love! Ah! if only Patricia, poor girl, was more like you!”

“She will improve,” said dear Dora generously. “She means well, and she is fond of you, dear.”

“I hope so,” answered Mrs. Hamley. “I have done my duty by her, but she is unsatisfactory.”

It was a little tragedy in its way. The love and confidence and blessing—the blessing of Isaac to Jacob—all bestowed on one whose whole life was a cheat, amiable and full of nice tact, but a cheat all the same; the reprobation given to the other whose faults were those of truth and loyalty, of conscience, love, and integrity. It was a tragedy in good sooth, but a common one.

Then Dora was dismissed and thanked for her prompt attention; and though Mrs. Hamley had herself desired that Patricia should not be disturbed, she had a sore feeling against her all the same, and thought she should have divined that something was wrong and have awakened of her own accord.

“It is so vulgar and heartless to sleep so soundly!” she said peevishly to Mr. Hamley: and Mr. Hamley, starting from sweet slumber and

checking an incipient snore, replied, "Yes, it is, my dear; but she is horrid vulgar, you know, when you've reckoned her up, top and tail!"

On which Mrs. Hamley rebuked him for disrespect, and maintained that her niece was perfectly well-bred, if not always satisfactory.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT THE DAY BROUGHT FORTH.

IT is not the people who do wrong that are unhappy ; it is the people who have to see the wrong done and are unable to prevent it. Between Dora and Patricia, the one had a conscience void of offence, the other was as miserable as she felt guilty. No secret had ever come into her life before, and she did not know what to do with it now that she had one. It was a terrible secret too ; not a mere childish peccadillo of no great consequence to keep or to tell ; but a secret that involved a daily deception of the worst kind, and perhaps a crime : who knows ?

Poor Patricia ! What with her love for Dora and her sense of duty to her aunt, her loyalty to her friend and her faithfulness to her guardian, the young girl's natural excitement at so unusual an event and the modest maiden's shame at such a

revelation, the overwhelming consciousness of the fact which made her feel as if she should be obliged to call aloud to the passers-by, "Dora is married!" on the one hand, and as if every one must know it without being told on the other, her life just now was illimitably wretched.

Dora, on her side, justified herself. She was sorry for what she had done; but she regretted, not repented. She thought she had been precipitate—with Lord Merrian at the Quest; and worse than precipitate now that Colonel Lowe was ruined and his consent or denial went for nothing. But though she saw no way out of the coil in which she was entangled, she was resolved not to make matters worse by an injudicious confession. She was glad that Patricia knew; she could make her useful, very useful; but she was quite determined that come what might no one else should know, unless Sydney came into the possession of enough to live on "nicely." She had but slender hopes that way. Still, even in these days, ravens do sometimes fly from out the darkness, and one might alight on Syd. Miracles had been wrought before now and might again; but until such a one had been worked in her favour, she was resolved to remain the dove in the ark of Abbey Holme, and to enjoy

the warmth and the wine, the soft carpets and the dainty attire, rather than go with her young husband into love and penury.

Penury was by no means to the taste of pretty Dora Drummond. To her way of thinking love in a cotton gown, with only cold mutton for dinner, was far more frightful than hate in velvet and contempt with diamonds in her hair. She would rather have the velvet and the diamonds than the love and the cold mutton; and Abbey Holme, with its subservience of habit and suppression of will—and the luxury and well-being that had become her second nature included—were to be preferred to Sydney Lowe ruined. She liked Sydney's love well enough, and she liked the excitement of their stolen meetings; they gave her a sweet sense of secret power and freedom that compensated for many disagreeables; but she would rather renounce the whole thing, deny her marriage now and for ever and become a second Lady Audley or Aurora Floyd, than keep to her bargain if it was for worse and not for better. And she believed that Sydney dreaded poverty even with love at its back just as much as she did herself; and that if occasion offered she could make him amenable to reason, and induce him to renounce and deny in concert.

Meanwhile, she slept like a child and woke like a rose, and took care of her eyes and complexion as other people take care of their consciences and their love.

She came down to breakfast the next day sweet, fresh, delicate, dainty, and exactly punctual as ever. She inquired tenderly of Mrs. Hamley how she was, when she came in just the prescribed three minutes after her; inquired tenderly and devotedly, as if no graver care, no heavier weight oppressed her than the condition of an elderly woman's digestion. For Mrs. Hamley being of the grim order had struggled manfully with the remains of her last night's indisposition, and had straightened herself courageously for her daily duties, appearing at the head of the table, upright, lady-like, well-dressed, well-powdered, and with all her addenda and succedanea as accurately adjusted as ever; even to the hair restorer "which was not a dye," but which nevertheless made grey hair brown at odd moments, and hung a veil before the hour-glass of Time so that its spent sand should not be seen.

Presently Patricia came in. She had kept awake half the night, now listening to hear if her aunt was astir and needing help—how it all reminded her of her dear uncle!—now fretting about Dora, and

making her head ache between fear and pity, dread and horror; and thus had fallen asleep only when far into the morning—the “mouth of the morning,” as the old Gaelic has it. Consequently she had been roused with difficulty, and had dressed herself hurriedly; with the inevitable result.

She came in when prayers were over; and this was her first offence. For Mrs. Hamley held by family prayers. They were respectable and might do the servants good, and they made the proper kind of roll-call whereby she might be sure of her domestic forces; and she was implacable when any one was missing. And when Patricia did come in she looked tumbled and disturbed; her hair was not sufficiently smooth, her brooch was awry, she had forgotten her cuffs, and she had no bow to her band. And all these misdemeanours together filled up the measure till it overflowed.

“Are you better, aunty dear?” she said eagerly from the door, so soon as she had opened it.

Mrs. Hamley did not like people to speak to her from a distance, nor for the matter of that too near. Her hearing was just in that woolly stage when there is a special need of distinctness; but it was an unpardonable offence to let the need be seen.

“Will you have the kindness not to speak to me

at that distance, and not to talk so fast?" said Aunt Hamley stiffly.

Patricia went up to her. "Are you better this morning, dear?" she asked again in her loud, clear voice.

"Good gracious, child! you are enough to deafen one!" said Mrs. Hamley peevishly, putting her hands over her ears. "Yes, I am; I am obliged to you. Though I am sure I do not know why you should ask," she added with an offended kind of sneer. "You were not very much interested in my condition last night. I might have died, for anything you knew or cared! Sleeping through all that noise like a tired milkmaid! The place might be carried away, and you would not hear!"

"But I did hear and was not asleep," said Patricia.

"And if you knew that I was so ill why did you not have the grace to come and see me?" asked Mrs. Hamley sharply.

"Bignold would not let me go into your room," she said.

"And Bignold was quite right," returned Mrs. Hamley with illogical severity. "But you might have gone to Dora. Dora came to me; and you might at least have sent your love and duty by

her, and asked to know if you could be of any use."

"Dora——" began Patricia; when Dora raised her sweet eyes, and said to Patricia—

"I did not like to disturb you, dear; though I felt sure you would want to know if you were awake. But I thought it a pity to make you anxious for nothing, as you could not help. I hope I did no wrong. If I did, you must forgive me; but I acted for the best. So you see,"—gracefully to Mrs. Hamley, and with a generous impulse shining through her timidity—"if any one is to blame it is I; but I acted for the best."

"You always do, my love," said Mrs. Hamley kindly, and Mr. Hamley wagged his head approvingly.

Patricia flushed till the tears were forced into her eyes. Her position was becoming unbearable. More as a relief to her own feelings than because she thought she would be welcome, she put her arms round her aunt, and said affectionately—

"You must not think me unfeeling, dear, because I was kept out. If you only knew, aunty, how sorry I was, and how glad I am to see you in your old place to-day!"

"There! that will do, my dear!" said Aunt Hamley, throwing her off by a sudden twist. "You

are late enough as it is. Go and sit down, and eat your breakfast like a lady. I hate such disorderly ways!"

She could never resist the temptation of snubbing Patricia. She had that odd self-contradictory feeling for her which made her impatient that she was not this and that which she was not, and more impatient still when she did as she had desired. If the girl left her alone, she neglected her; if she paid her attention, she fussed her; whatever she did was wrong, and she was all that she ought not to be. Her image was reflected in a crooked mirror, where not a line was straight nor a form beautiful.

So Patricia went to her place; passing by Dora, whom she kissed with a new sensation and bashfully, as if she had been kissing Sydney Lowe by implication; and then to Mr. Hamley, with her frank eyes a little clouded, and her head, generally borne so straight, a little drooped because of that mystery she had penetrated.

Mr. Hamley rose pompously, shook hands with her noisily, and asked her to have everything on the table in a hurried heaped-up way, as if they were Israelites at the Passover eating with loins girded for a journey and in haste. It was his way of rebuke; and effectual. All these were but small

things taken separately and if they came only on occasions, but all at once, and continually occurring, they were enough to sadden a young girl of even as much cheerful courage as Patricia. So the morning was melancholy for her ; and what with the burden of her secret and the sore of her snubbing she was wretched enough, and found herself more than once wondering when Gordon Frere would be at home again, that her life might take back its old brightness and freedom and love : more than once wishing that, until this time came, she might be allowed to find a home with her friends at the Hollies. If only this might be, how happy she would be then, when now she was so miserable !

Just after luncheon Mr. Sydney Lowe called. He asked for Mr. Hamley, and by his own desire was shown into the library, where the master sat surrounded by gorgeously bound books he never read, and could not have understood if he had ; gorgeously bound books interspersed with lengths of lettered dummies, cleverly made by the carpenter, and quite as valuable to Mr. Hamley as the realities. Indeed, being more ingenious, they were more valuable.

The interview was not long. Sydney asked permission to address Miss Drummond ; and Mr. Hamley replied cheerfully—with all his heart if he

could satisfy him about ways and means. His present income? his future expectations? prosaic things no doubt, but even a young gentleman in love must remember that the butcher would demand payment once a year at least, and it was as well to be provided with the means beforehand.

To all this Sydney was charmingly reasonable. He was quite prepared to answer Mr. Hamley's questions, and he believed satisfactorily. He mentioned Cragfoot with a flourish; reminded Mr. Hamley that he was his father's heir and only child, and that his mother's jointure would come to him at her death. His mother, Mr. Hamley might be aware, was Lady Anne Graham's daughter, and his father's name spoke for itself.

"It all sounds quite first-rate," said Mr. Hamley; "but"—slowly, as if he was only reflecting; for he could afford to be gracious to-day—"I happen to know that Cragfoot is mortgaged up to the chimney-pots, and that your mother's inalienable jointure is two hundred a year, allowed by your father. Where the sixty thousand pounds she brought loose in her pocket has gone is more than I can tell; you had better ask your father; and if he tells you, pass the information on. It may be useful. I am

afraid, Mr. Lowe, sir, if you cannot show a better invoice than this it will be no go for you ! ”

Sydney set his teeth. The two men had grappled, but they were still making a feint of courtesy.

“ I know that my father is in a little temporary embarrassment which he will soon overcome,” said Sydney.

“ When he has overcome it I shall be happy to treat with you again,” answered Mr. Hamley politely. “ Until then understand that I take it on myself as a duty not to allow any engagement between you and Miss Drummond. Miss Drummond has been brought up quite the lady, and if ever she marries she must marry where she will be kept the lady still.”

“ I hope, Mr. Hamley, you do not think she would forfeit her position as a gentlewoman in marrying me,” said Sydney with a flash of the old vicious passion.

“ Oh, dear me, no ! not at all, sir. Still, you have not means enough to keep her in what I call the lap of luxury, as she is now. And I would not bestow her hand on any one who could not put down pound for pound with me.”

“ Are the lady’s own inclinations to go for nothing ? ” said Sydney warmly.

"They may go for everything, Mr. Lowe. I have no legal right over Miss Drummond. If she likes she can walk out of this house arm-in-arm with you or my groom, and marry to-morrow if it pleases her. But if she does, she and her husband will never see a farthing of my money; and I think I know her too well to be afraid of her."

"If you call that being good to a girl you profess to love like a daughter, I do not!" said Sydney angrily.

Mr. Hamley raised his eyes, and looked at him steadily.

"I didn't know that my being bad or good to the girl was part of the business between us," he said. "And what's more, I don't care a snuff whether you think me one or t'other. The business is, What money have you got to marry on? and it's my say—Not enough."

"And I say I have, if you will give a sufficient income to the girl you have adopted as your daughter."

Mr. Hamley burst into a loud harsh laugh.

"Now that we've cracked the nut we've come to the kernel," he said. "Teach your grandmother! Not a halfpenny, Mr. Lowe! If you have her, you must take her in her shift; unless you can give her

the silk gown to cover her. I tell you again, I'll lay down pound for pound with you, and no man can say fairer; but I'll not give her without an equivalent."

"The love of a gentleman counts for something," said Sydney disdainfully.

Mr. Hamley laughed even more disdainfully.

"Not on my ship," he said. "I'm a self-made man myself, and know what's what pretty well by now. I'd rather Miss Drummond married a man as could keep her as she ought to be kept, than a man as called himself a gentleman, and hadn't a blessed penny to play chuck-farthing with!"

"You speak as if I was a beggar, Mr. Hamley!" said Sydney angrily.

"Do I?" he answered with supreme coolness. "The remedy is in your own hands if I do. Show me Cragfoot without a mortgage on it, and a good thirty thousand to the back of it, and then I'll say my service to you. But," he added, suddenly changing from coolness to insolence, "I'm not a-going to give my money to set you and your father on your legs again, with Miss Drummond, forsooth, as the decoy duck. Feather your own nest by your honest industry, as I have feathered mine, and then you can ask a gentleman for a lady's hand like a

gentleman yourself, and not like a sneak and a swindler. No, sir, not if I know it!" he cried, as Sydney caught up a heavy ebony ruler, and Mr. Hamley seized his arm just in time.

"You infernal blackguard!" exclaimed Sydney, struggling in his grasp and hitting out savagely.

Mr. Hamley held him off with one hand, and rang the bell violently with the other. The servant came at the instant from the hall.

"Show Mr. Lowe the door, John," said the master of the house, releasing him. "And if he ventures to show his face in here again, set the dogs at him. There!" he said, rubbing his hands as Sydney, with a horrible imprecation, was ushered out of the room, "that's the best day's work I ever did in my life! I have paid off old scores with interest, and I feel twice the man I did for it. He have Dora? No, not if he licked my foot for her, and I broke the whole boiling of them—as I will!"

CHAPTER IX.

CONSENTING WITH SINNERS.

GIVING himself time to cool down a little, for he was flushed and rudely excited, into the drawing-room presently walked Mr. Hamley, with a high-handed masterful air, even more self-assertive and swaggering than usual. He found the ladies in their accustomed places and occupied in their accustomed work : that is, Mrs. Hamley was at one side of the fire knitting a coloured couvre-pied, Dora was at the other doing dainty modern point, each with her own special little velvet table by her side, and Patricia was in the bay of the window, at the remotest point, reading, or rather seeming to read, but in reality thinking of what she knew. The master surveyed his feminine belongings graciously. He felt grand and Eastern as he looked at them.

“ I have had a visit, ladies, that will interest you like one of Mr. Mudie’s green things there,” he began.

They all looked up; dear Dora smiled in her gentle way.

"A love story," he continued.

He was doling out his news by bits; it was too precious to give entire and all at once.

"Indeed!"

This was Dora's exclamation; she was the only one who spoke.

"Indeed? Yes, it is indeed, I think. I have been well amazed, I can tell you. A young man has just been here asking permission to pay his addresses to one of you two young ladies. There now, the cat's out."

"But to which of us?" asked Dora gaily.

"Well, which? Guess."

"Patricia," laughed Dora; "she is the younger."

Her words made the girl start as if she had been touched by a hot iron. It was partly sacrilege, and partly an insult.

"What a shame!" she said hotly.

"Calm yourself, my dear; so, so! be calm, I beg!" said Mr. Hamley, in an aggravating stable kind of voice. "Don't get so excited about nothing. It was not you; it was Miss Drummond."

"Me!" cried Dora, arching her eyebrows. "What an idea!"

"So I said, but I treated him as civil as if he had been a prince; that I did! I asked him his means, as one gentleman to another, and he said, 'Cragfoot.' Now you know him."

"Sydney Lowe?" said Dora, as if she had been guessing a riddle.

"You might have made a worse shot," answered Mr. Hamley.

"And Cragfoot is a lovely place, and Mr. Lowe comes of a good family," said Mrs. Hamley crossly.

She had not the slightest desire that Dora should marry Sydney, but she did not like the whole thing to be regulated without her voice making itself heard in the councils.

"I grant you, Lady," Mr. Hamley answered pompously. "Of the young man himself I will say nothing; he is not my mark exactly; but Cragfoot would not be bad even for a young lady out of Abbey Holme, if it was Cragfoot, and not as one may say a mere shell with a name tacked to it. I have reason to know that it is mortgaged body and bones, and that the colonel is neither more nor less than a bankrupt. What he and that precious son of his have would not keep Miss Drummond in shoe-leather. Was I wrong, then, to refuse him her hand?"

"How can you ask such a silly question?" said

Mrs. Hamley tartly. "How could the child marry a young man without any money to live on? It was an insult to ask for her."

"Was I wrong, Dora?" he continued, turning to Dora and watching her narrowly.

"Certainly not," she said steadily. "As dear Mrs. Hamley says, I cannot live on nothing."

"Is this your only reason?" he asked again.

"Why, yes," she answered lightly.

"You would not have liked it if he could have laid down a clean bill? You are not what is called 'in love' with him?"

Patricia's heart stood still. By her face it would have seemed as if her own love, not Dora's, rested on the answer.

Dora raised her eyes. "In love with him? No!" she said, with the faintest little movement of her round shoulders.

"And at those times when he has tried to make himself agreeable to you, you have held him off?" again asked Mr. Hamley, still searching her face.

"Yes, indeed I have," Dora answered, her sweet face the very ideal of frankness if also of tender modesty. "I have never encouraged him; he knows that."

Patricia gave a shuddering kind of gasp and

dashed from the room like a storm passing through it. This was consenting with sinners indeed ; and she staggered under the burden of her cross. Her whole nature revolted at the false position in which she stood, and the sin to which she was so unwillingly a party. She felt that she must get out of the house, shake off the influence of this strange, cold, lying life, else she should suffocate and die. She ran up-stairs, locked herself in her own room, and bathed her face in cold water to get rid of a kind of cobweb that seemed to have come before her eyes. Her pulses were beating tumultuously, but she was trembling as if in an ague-fit. Heat and cold, poverty and hunger, she could have borne, and cheerfully ; but this continual presence of evil to which she must give a tacit consent, this awful confusion of thoughts and feelings, this terrible uncertainty of duties, this love without honour, this pity without sympathy that she felt for Dora, nearly maddened her. She was like one carried away in a torrent where was no help and no hope.

She flung herself on her knees and laid out her sorrows in passionate prayer ; but no angel came down to tell her what she ought to do, and though her prayer carried the blessing of present soothing with it, it brought no solution of her difficulties.

Flushed, yet still with this ague-like trembling on her, she dressed herself for a walk and went back into the drawing-room. She wanted to get out of the house, first of all things, and she wanted to go down to the Hollies. If she could find peace anywhere, it would be there.

"I am so feverish, dear aunt; do let me go out for a little while!" she pleaded in answer to Mrs. Hamley's look of astonished rebuke.

Dora rose from her seat and went up to her caressingly. Patricia trembled more than ever, and turned away her head. Acting, which was as easy as breathing to the one, which was indeed a pleasant pastime, was agony to the other; and having to control herself at this moment was an added pain she felt Dora might have spared her.

"You are not looking well, dear," said Dora kindly. "How I wish I was as strong as you and able to face the cold as you do! I would go with you." In a whisper she said pleadingly, "Do not think harshly of me, dear!"

"Please may I go, aunt?" said Patricia, not answering Dora, not returning the pressure of her hand—she whose frank love had hitherto leapt so gladly to meet the faintest sign of tenderness her friend had ever shown; but her own heart only

knew how hard it was to steel herself against that pleading voice, how desperate the pain to have to judge harshly where she loved so warmly !

Mrs. Hamley was vexed by her request. She disliked being made a fuss with when she was ill, but she liked to be the central consideration of the house—to have her little court standing at respectful attention, waiting on Providence and her humour, watching for time and her pleasure. It seemed to her the most heartless, the most shameless thing that could have happened ; but she said, “ Certainly, Patricia, you can go,” coldly, with the feeling of a martyr generously sacrificing her rights for another’s pleasure.

“ I will be back before dark,” said Patricia.

“ May I ask where you are going ?—or am I presuming too much on my position as your guardian and the mistress of the house ? ” said Mrs. Hamley with cold formality.

“ I want to go down to the Hollies,” answered Patricia. “ I want to see Miss Fletcher.”

“ May I suggest, Patricia, that this continual going to the Hollies is rather odd and not very delicate ? ” said Mrs. Hamley, still in the same cold and formal manner.

“ How not delicate ? ” asked Patricia. “ Miss

Fletcher wishes me to go. I do not force myself on her."

Mrs. Hamley glanced up at her contemptuously ; she was about to say, "Dr. Fletcher is an unmarried man ;" but when she saw the child-like face that looked down in frank inquiry into hers, the better part of her womanhood prevailed over the worse and she conquered her spite for the sake of her involuntary reverence. Undoubtedly Patricia was a fool, she thought ; but she was an innocent one, and it was not for her to enlighten her.

"Go, if you like," she said crossly. "What you and Catherine Fletcher can find to say to each other is more than I can make out. You are the dullest companion possible at home. I suppose, like many other people, you reserve your liveliness for strangers and give your home only your ill tempers."

At that moment the door-bell rang, and Lord Merrian and Dr. Fletcher were announced. They had met at the lodge-gate, the one riding, the other walking, and so had come up the drive together. As if by magic Mrs. Hamley's sour face changed its expression and became placid and well-bred. She could have dispensed with the doctor ; but the coming of the young lord so soon after

their own call gratified her immensely. It must have done so to have made her so suddenly amiable.

"I hope you do not consider me intrusive," said Lord Merrian with his fine smile and gracious manner; "but I fancy this belongs to one of you ladies, and as I was riding past I undertook to deliver it for my mother; else," smiling again—and what a pleasant smile it was—"I should scarcely have ventured on such an invasion."

It was a mere nothing that he gave to Mrs. Hamley, wrapped in a little tissue paper parcel—a rather tumbled crape bow, one of the mysteries of Patricia's dress that, as she phrased it, had gone adrift in the drawing-room at the Quest. It was not an unusual thing for Patricia's ornamental trimmings to go adrift, and Mrs. Hamley often found it necessary to lecture her on the righteousness of needle and thread, and the value of that stitch in time which saves nine. This time, however, she condoned the offence for the sake of the visit it had occasioned, and handed it over to her niece with a smile that was more friendly and compassionate than usual.

Patricia blushed, of course, when she received her truant property, and looked very pretty, even through all her trouble of mind; but she was not

disposed to take any share in the conversation to-day, or to profit by Lord Merrian's visit in any way, so drew a little apart and sat down on a sofa standing diagonally like a barricade between the table and the window, by which Dora was left mistress of the situation; and as Lord Merrian could not have indulged in any of the heroics of yesterday, with so many critical ears to listen to him, he contented himself with the small talk of ordinary society, which suited "the fair girl" better, and showed her to advantage.

In the midst of an animated monologue on the music of the future, of which neither he nor his audience knew more than that its high priest was Richard Wagner and that it was excessively odd, Henry Fletcher went over to Patricia in his sloping, lazy way, and subsided on the sofa by her.

"Are you going out or coming in?" he asked, glancing at her hat and jacket.

"Going out," said Patricia. Then in a hurried unhappy voice she added: "I so much wish to see your sister to-day; I have just asked Aunt Hamley if I can go, and she says I may. May I go with you?"

His thin, brown, leathery face lighted up, and he looked quite young because so glad.

"Certainly," he said; "we shall be delighted. My sister was speaking of you this morning and saying that she wanted to see you again. Indeed I called now with a message from her, hoping to induce you to come."

"How good you are!" said Patricia lifting her eyes gratefully to his. "I will tell aunty, then; and as she said I might go, whenever you like I am ready."

"Perhaps I had better give her my sister's message," he answered smiling. "Mrs. Hamley is particular, and she may think I ought to do my own business *selon les convenances*. What an old father she thinks me!—just an umbrella!" he thought to himself with half a sigh. "And yet she is right; I am only an old father to her."

The request, made with that quiet taking-it-for-granted which so often gets what it asks, was successful, though Mrs. Hamley was not over well pleased with Dr. Fletcher or his object. She was indeed anything but pleased that her niece should leave at all during Lord Merrian's visit, and more especially was she annoyed that she should leave in company with Dr. Fletcher. But the Fletchers were people who had a peculiar power over Mrs. Hamley; she was always finding fault with them behind-backs,

but to their faces she did not resist them. She considered the one the son of perdition and the other the daughter of folly; nevertheless, strong in her own righteousness and wisdom as she was, she let them have their will of her when they chose to ask it, and while she affected to condemn did really respect them too much to gainsay them. As now, when she would rather have kept her niece to look beautiful in the eyes of the future Earl of Dovedale, but felt herself constrained to let her depart with Henry Fletcher because he had begged for her in the name of his sister, and had come up to carry her off.

So Patricia went with her friend, leaving Lord Merrian secretly disgusted and sore with the feeling of having been "sold;" but still discussing the music of the future, and the respective merits of Wagner and Verdi, as if he really enjoyed the conversation. He might have done so had not his interest been forestalled; for Dora was putting out all her little coquetties and fascinations with supreme indifference to the fact that another man called her wife, and that how much soever she might make Lord Merrian admire her, he could not advance her fortunes one jot nor abate by a line the difficulties of her present position. Wise as Dora

was, and far-seeing, she had not always the best kind of wisdom; and because she was deft in undoing knots she was not always sufficiently careful to keep her runnings clear. Like many clever people she enjoyed a complication wherein her talents could be exercised; and got herself into danger for the pleasure of getting out of it again.

"How I like being with you and Miss Fletcher!" said Patricia, drawing a long breath as she and Dr. Fletcher walked briskly down the avenue, and her load seemed already lessening from the mere contact with one whom she respected and who was true.

"Do you?" he answered, looking down at her kindly. "That's right! And we like to have you. Though this is more natural than that you should care to spend your time with two such elderly fogies as ourselves."

"Don't say that, Dr. Fletcher! Besides, if you are old, you remind me of my dear Barsands home more than any one else does," said Patricia simply. "Though you are so unlike him, I feel somehow when with you the same as I used to feel with my uncle. Only I had no Miss Fletcher then," she added a little sorrowfully. "I wish I had had."

Dr. Fletcher turned his eyes on her. She was

looking up at him frankly, affectionately, as she used to look at her uncle when he spoke to her. In a minor degree truly, less tenderly, less demonstratively, but in the same spirit.

He smiled.

"I take that as the highest compliment you can pay me," he said.

Then he turned away and the smile faded from his face.

Miss Fletcher was glad to see her pet, and half surprised that leave had been given her to come. Knowing Mrs. Hamley she was very sure it was a "tight pattern" for poor Patricia from first to last. She pitied her with her whole heart, and often said to her brother how much she wished they could take her away bodily and bring her to the Hollies for life. Perhaps her saying this so often had made him think of ways and means. But the one which seemed most natural was just the way which was most impracticable; and as yet the woman's loving wish to protect, guide, and bless the girl, had no issue in any plan on which it was possible to act. To-day she was even more than usually tender to the poor child. She saw at once that the young soul was ill at ease, and that something had gone wrong; and Catherine Fletcher was not a woman of

that kind of motherliness which cares only for the body. She knew in her own person what sorrows and difficulties lie in the heart and mind, in the affections and in the thoughts; and the strong and generous hands which cared to give good gifts to the poor cared also to bring consolation to the sad and surety to the doubtful.

Presently Patricia began to talk about the perplexities of life, and the need she at all events—she would speak for no one else—had of superior direction; how she envied the Roman Catholics in being able to go to a man learned in righteousness and spiritually wise who could tell them what to do, and disentangle their contradictory duties so that they became clear and simple.

“And if you had a director, what would you say to him, dear?” asked Miss Fletcher, who saw that her words had a personal meaning.

“Oh, many things!” she answered. “But I do not want to talk of myself. I only want to know what ought to be done, whether by me or by any one else.”

“Give me an instance.”

“Well, this,” said innocent Patricia, feeling quite diplomatic, and sailing as near to the wind in the matter of honesty as was possible for any right-

mind person. "If you knew of anything wrong going on in the house where you were, would you think it your duty to tell what you knew to the head of the house?"

"That depends, my dear, on two things; one, if my keeping silence involved my being mixed up in anything unworthy, the other if keeping silence did harm to others. If the first, I should think I owed it to my own self-respect to keep my hands clean, and if I could do that only by public protest, I would make it."

"But I am not mixed up in it, except by knowing it and keeping it secret—consenting by silence," interrupted Patricia.

"You see, dear, as I do not know the circumstances, I cannot answer you very satisfactorily," returned Miss Fletcher. "This is not saying that you are to confide in me. If the secret, whatever it is, is not your own, you must not tell it even to me; but none the more can I give you a clear answer."

"No one can answer difficult moral problems or vague hypotheses," said Dr. Fletcher, in his calm way. "What I should say, is this. If you have personally nothing to do with the circumstances to which you are alluding, leave it alone, unless it is injuring others; and then I think you are bound to

tell it. As a rule, we are not obliged to be detectives or informants; though most young people who care for truth and justice think they are consecrated to this task before all others. But there is a world of difference between action and negation, sharing and silence."

"Yes, I see; but it is so dreadful to know that things are going wrong and people being deceived every day, and under one's own eyes!" said Patricia.

"When one hears things said that are not true, it makes one feel as if one told stories one's self by not crying out that they are untrue."

"If what you know hurts your aunt and Mr. Hamley, you ought to tell them," said Miss Fletcher. "If it implicates you, you ought to tell them also. But if it does not hurt them, and is only a wrong done by some one to his own conscience, his own sense of right, leave it. Don't you see? You have either been told in confidence or you have found it out by chance. If the former, you are bound to secrecy; if the latter, you need not constitute yourself the police of morality. Are you any clearer now?"

"Just a little," said Patricia with a heavy sigh. "At all events I will not speak, at least not yet."

Neither Dr. Fletcher nor his sister took Patricia's

perplexities to mean more than her discovery of some of those domestic peccadilloes which are inevitable in a household as tightly held as Mrs. Hamley's; human nature rebelling against undue bondage, and rebellion having the trick of expressing itself in ugly forms and crooked ways. They were a little afraid of her fearlessness and strong sense of right; and thought it better to curb rather than to spur her on. In fact they took her fears to be probably exaggerated; and as they did not want to see her become meddlesome or officious in her quest after the noble life, they put her off with an anodyne rather than a solvent. But if they soothed her, all the same they heartened her; and she went back to her prison with a braver will, setting herself to bear the burden of Dora's sin with as much courage and equanimity as she could command, and hoping for both relief and solution in times not too distant.

"The zeal of the young is so apt to outrun discretion," said Dr. Fletcher when she had left. "But what a noble nature it is!"

"Yes, rarely so!" his sister answered. "It is what Montalembert called a true 'bath of life,' to be with Patricia Kemball. She is the most perfect creature of the natural kind I have ever seen. She

reminds me of the old classic nymph, or of the ideal savage princess, clothed but not converted to our odd conventionalities of life."

Dr. Fletcher smiled and said yes, but made no further remark; and then Catherine looked for a moment at the picture of a young knight after Albert Dürer hanging on the wall, and her soft brown eyes became dreamy and mournful as she looked. It was an old print picked up at a broker's in London, which had reminded her of Reginald Kemball; and for that reason had been hung where she could always see it. For there had been certain love passages between Catherine and Reginald in olden times; love passages interrupted in the bad old way of jealousy and misunderstanding when Colonel Lowe, then a dashing young officer with laurels freshly gathered in the Crimean trenches, had come down to set the world of Milltown womanhood in a flame, and to devote himself to Catherine Fletcher in especial. Reginald, self-doubting, jealous, sore, poor, had taken Captain Lowe's attentions as Catherine's acceptance. No distinct understanding had been come to between the unsuccessful artist and the squire's daughter; and from the time when Captain Lowe's fancy had turned that way, he took care that none should be possible. He ap-

propriated Catherine in that quietly determined manner in which some men contrive to dominate women and public opinion; and Milltown put its wisest heads together and settled everything to its satisfaction. Some of them even knew the price of the bridal gown and veil, and where they were bought; and a few scented wedding-cake in a certain clock-case which came from London. There was nothing more positive than that Captain Lowe and Catherine Fletcher were to make a match of it; and while all the world waited for the wedding, Reginald Kemball went off to London, and in a fit of despair married Patricia's mother—a pretty and affectionate little girl who was badly treated at home, and who fell in love with the handsome artist at sight.

But Captain Lowe did not marry Catherine Fletcher. He was deeply in debt, and Miss Graham, Lady Anne's daughter and heiress, had a dower that would not only cover his deficiencies, but set him well before the world for life. So he married where he did not love, and only "for money;" as his poor wife found out when too late. And he had no scruple in proving to her that what she had found out was correct. He always used to say that the only woman he ever really loved was

Catherine Fletcher; and he passed a great part of his time in bewailing the untowardness of circumstances, which had prevented his marrying her. When he had done anything specially bad, he used to excuse his sin to himself by saying that he would have been a different man with her. He would never have got into his present bad habits of drink, debt, and the race-course; but he would have gone on in his profession, and by this time would have been a General. He would have made a name; and he would have deserved what he had made. All the potentialities for good which poor, weak Matilda Graham had had power to render abortive, according to him, would have bloomed and blossomed into the stateliest growth, the goodliest fruit, had Catherine Fletcher taken him in hand.

With only the germ of a conscience, with no sense of justice, and with the moral coward's need of self-justification and a scapegoat, Colonel Lowe laid the burden of his sins, which were heavy, on the shoulders of the woman whose life he had ruined. It is the way of the world; a habit belonging by nature to the average son of Adam, with whom Eve is always the *teterrima causa*, and the woman who did tempt him. Catherine Fletcher, however, would not have married Colonel Lowe had he asked

her; so his unfortunate wife carried more blame than she deserved on this side as well as on others; and the Colonel's bewailings were as baseless as those of a child who runs after a rainbow—and fails to catch it.

CHAPTER X.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

IT was not to be expected that the Lowes would let such an insult as that which Mr. Hamley had just offered to the heir of the house pass without some kind of notice; though Sydney, wisely enough, made the least not the most of it. But the question was, what could be done? It was a disagreeable position as things were, but how could it be bettered? As Colonel Lowe said, sagely enough, the ruffian would not fight if he was called out; and there was no case for a summons—scarcely one for a thrashing. A man's house is his castle, and if he chooses to be king on his own door-step and to shut the door in the face of intruders, there is no one to gainsay him, and the law upholds his right of expulsion. The case was certainly difficult; and Colonel Lowe confessed that he could not see his way clearly.

On the one hand he felt, as he had always felt, that he had condescended too low in receiving Mr. Hamley as a guest on an equal footing. A man who had worked his way up from sixpence a day, and been lashed in the street for a bare-footed beggar, even if he had ultimately come to the possession of Abbey Holme, was not like a man born in the purple and wrapped in its golden fringes from the beginning. Yet, on the other hand, Mr. Hamley was rich, and Cragfoot was mortgaged up to the chimney-pots; and from information received the Colonel had reason to believe that the master of Abbey Holme knew more about that mortgage than any one else, save himself and the lawyer. Then, Sydney was evidently deeply attached to that pretty piece of waxwork, Dora Drummond; and, such being the case, there seemed to be no way of making him take kindly to the idea of Julia Manley, even with her five thousand a-year to gild her freckles and beautify her homely camel's face. It was odd how tenacious and unselfish the boy was! thought the father, wondering. He did not believe that he could have been so hard hit, and so disinterested. Though he was sorry for it, and quite capable of being immovably severe and furiously angry if Syd still

went on persisting in his folly, all the same he could not help honouring him in his own heart—he who had always thought his boy selfish, forced now to rate his power of disinterested love as superior to the charms of competency for life!

Yet none of these thoughts answered the one grave question: What was to be done? The gentleman's blue blood boiled, but the embarrassed man's necessities froze it back to calmness; the father's natural wish to see his son happy plucked him by the skirts, but the aristocrat's disdain of mud, however thickly mixed with gold, held him by the sleeve; while over all flamed the fiery man's angry passion and instinctive desire to lay hands on his foe.

In the midst of his perplexity the Colonel be-thought himself of Henry Fletcher, and went off to consult "the wisest man in the parish." He went just as it was getting dark, at about five o'clock, while Patricia was there taking counsel for herself. But when the two men were seated in the library—the keen, mobile face of the one contrasting so strongly with the thoughtful serenity of the other—what could the one say that the other did not know? The idea of Mr. Hamley fighting a duel with Sydney Lowe was as absurd

as that of his playing Harlequin in a pantomime. If a challenge was sent he would simply refer the thing to the gentlemen on the bench, his brother magistrates, stating how it came about that the young man was thirsting for his blood—because, not being able to make proper provision for his adopted daughter, he had therefore declined his proposal of marriage. And the bench would applaud him, and gravely censure Mr. Sydney Lowe, with public ridicule to follow. No; that was not to be thought of for a moment.

To be sure, he might have told him more delicately. Dr. Fletcher allowed that; but “what can you expect from a snob like that? a beggar on horseback—a self-made cur!” said the Colonel disdainfully; with a moral lunge at his friend and host who at this moment stood in some sort answerable for Mr. Hamley’s insolence. For was he not a “confounded Rad,” and thought snobs as good as gentlemen? And are not all who uphold the rights of the poor, and who preach the fraternity of men, answerable for the sins and shortcomings of their plebeian brethren?

Dr. Fletcher was accustomed to these moral lunges, and never cared to oppose or to return them. He passed them quietly by, and went on to the second

head of the subject under consideration ; the love-affair between the young people ; of which the Colonel had just made pathetic use, appearing as the tender father, the sympathetic witness, with a very creditable display of the softer emotions.

Well, as for the love affair, said Dr. Fletcher, that of course rested in the hands of the young people themselves. They were of age, and might manage that as they chose. If their love was as strong as Colonel Lowe had said, could not something be done to set them up in hope, if not in present means ? Was it so utterly impossible for Sydney to do anything whereby he might gain an honest living ? In fact, would not a sincere love for a portionless girl give an incentive to exertion, such as nothing else could supply ? Might it not prove to be one of those blessings in disguise which sometimes come into men's lives, like angels unawares ? Sydney Lowe might do worse, perhaps, than engage himself to Dora with the determination to make a home for her, and discover the means of supporting her by his own manful work.

"Good heavens, Henry, don't talk of such a thing !" interrupted the Colonel angrily—sympathy with young love scattered to the winds. "Marry Miss Drummond ! that would be the crowning

misfortune—the most infernal mischief of the whole lot!”

Take it all round, then, and from above and below, Mr. Hamley was master of the situation. He always was master of the situation, whatever it might be. For what else had he cultivated his will as he had done?—for what else lived through those early years in toil and penury, preparing the ground for his present greatness, if he could not stand four-square now, dominating circumstances?

The Colonel felt, he said, “like a race-horse haltered by a boor;” and he backed up the simile by a quantity of bad language that affected the matter at issue about as much as the snorts of the race-horse would have affected the haltering by the boor. But as oaths and imprecations do not clear a man’s brain, Henry Fletcher brought him back to the subject in hand, and discussed it afresh; till they both came to the conclusion—nothing was to be done.

“And I might have saved myself the trouble of asking your advice!” said the Colonel ill-temperedly.

“Unless talking a thing over makes it clearer,” said Dr. Fletcher. “I think too, it is always

satisfactory to know that another mind sees things in the same light as one's self; for two people, and one an unimpassioned spectator, will scarcely be blinded or warped in concert."

"It is not much of blinding or warping, if by that you mean friendly partisanship, that any one will get from you, Henry," said Colonel Lowe pettishly.

And Dr. Fletcher thought, not for the first time, that, whatever men may say, women are not after all the exclusive possessors of the folly lying in undisciplined tempers.

There being nothing then to be said on the subject, beyond the three words "Leave it alone," the two men went into the drawing-room; where Colonel Lowe drew a chair close to Miss Fletcher, and began to talk to her in a low voice, being in that mood which makes a man long for a sympathetic auditor—a creature with soft eyes and expansive faith—to whom he can tell the fact of his grievance while keeping back the form of the truth.

He always went for sympathy to Catherine when things went wrong. True, he had behaved ill to her; he liked to believe that. He liked to believe that he had nearly broken her heart, and that it

was because of him she had never married ; but that did not trouble his conscience or make him shy of seeking her sympathy when he thought he wanted it. She was his sanctuary, the refuge to which he fled when he was unlucky on the turf, or more than usually discontented with his unhappy wife ; or indeed, when he was only idle and wanted amusement. And as all women nourish a certain tenderness for the man who has once been in love with them, she gave him the sweet pity for which he came, and generally did really soothe him. He was always "poor Charles" to her ; and she held it as an article of faith that he had thrown himself away on Miss Graham, and might have done better had his wife been a woman of more character. She was wrong there. Men of Colonel Lowe's stamp are impatient of superior women as their wives. Slaves suit them better, seeing that they must be tyrants, not only masters. Better keep such men as friends only, not take them as husbands. Friendship with a dash of sentiment in it gets the wine of life, where marriage soon comes to the lees ; and had poor Charles and dear Catherine married they would have been as miserable in their own way as were now the Colonel and that frightened, tormented Matilda of his.

While Colonel Lowe sat by Catherine and played at sentiment and melancholy, but thinking all the same, "Poor dear Kate, how stout she grows!" and while Demeter took him into her honest, loving heart and pitied him vaguely, Dr. Fletcher was talking to Patricia on that sentence of St. Paul: "For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren."

"I think," he said, "if we cared more about others and less about ourselves—more to do that which is good for our neighbours and less merely to save our own souls—it would be better for the world and a higher state generally of spiritual life. The great art of righteous living is to live for others and the advancement of the truth, rather than for our own individual moral culture. Herein I stand against Goethe and with Paul."

He said this with intention. He had an idea that Patricia was in danger of drifting into a state of rigid selfhood and moral hardness, virtuous enough but not the highest virtue; and he wished to save her from the danger. He missed his way. Her danger was in excess of sacrifice, and the fire he laid on the altar kindled more than was needed.

"Yes," she said warmly, "I will remember that."

But as she spoke, she turned a troubled face to Colonel Lowe; and Dr. Fletcher, though he had not the key to the riddle, noted her look. Was it possible, he thought after awhile, still watching the troubled face, that her perplexities were connected with this love-affair between Sydney and Miss Drummond? Had she been entangled in the meshes? dragged into complicity? The more he thought and the keener he noted, the more he seemed to see light; but he resolved to keep his suspicions to himself and not to share them even with his sister. Was it possible too, that this love-affair had gone farther than was known? He had no idea how far, and his mind stopped short of real evil. He imagined nothing worse than a secret understanding between the two young people; but a secret understanding of which Patricia had been made free, and of which her honesty felt the burden grievous.

He was sorry if she had been implicated in this matter, and he wished he could help her to clear her feet from the snare into which she had run. But what could he do? Just as he was powerless in counsel with the Colonel, so was he unable to be of use to Patricia. He could not ask her to confide in him; and she would not have done so had he asked

her. It was one of those miserable passes in life when sorrow is unavoidable and help is not to be had ; when the soul must walk through its own dangers unaided, and those who could make the way smooth must stand by inactive.

Presently the maid came in with the information that the Abbey Holme servants had come for Miss Kemball. The lengthening February days were still too short to allow her to return alone ; for the twilight had come by now ; so Mrs. Hamley sent one of the footmen and her own maid to bring her back, not choosing to let Patricia be seen alone with a man, even in plush and with a powdered head, and thinking Bignold, unaccompanied, insufficient protection for a walk of twenty minutes in a place where everybody knew everybody else, where fustian doffed its cap and said "Good night" to broadcloth, as if class homage was the eleventh commandment, and where all the grandees were of the Lord's anointed to the little people. The whole country round Milltown was as safe as the Abbey Holme drawing-room ; but Mrs. Hamley sent a man and a maid, meaning a rebuke, and to show her niece how troublesome and upsetting she was.

To-night however, she was trebly protected, for as the Colonel's way home lay in the same direction

—Cragfoot standing on the London Road, past Abbey Holme—and as he was walking, he insisted on going with her. His quarrel was with Mr. Hamley, not with Mrs. Hamley's handsome niece; and he enjoyed the idea how angry it would make the old ruffian to know that he had so little regard for him as to deny him the triumph of annoyance, and that he was so profoundly indifferent to anything this other could say or do as to be able to treat one of the family with his customary condescension.

So Patricia walked off with her companion, followed by her two guardians, whereof the one was grim and the other impudent, devoutly wishing herself back in the wilds of Barsands, where were neither gentlemen nor powdered footmen, and where she could come and go as she listed with no one to protect her and no one from whom to be protected. She would not have minded so much, she thought, if Dr. Fletcher had been with them; but it was a terrible trial to be thrown suddenly alone into the hands of Colonel Lowe, knowing what she knew, and instinctively dreading him as she did.

The Colonel got little good out of her companionship. Her frank face was clouded; her loud, clear, argentine voice subdued; he could talk of nothing that interested her, of nothing that could

pull her, as it were, out of the enchanted wood of her thoughts; and "Dora is married to your son" was so entirely the one dominant phrase which her mind kept on repeating to her that she was in terror lest she should unwittingly say it aloud. What he asked of her she answered; but shyly, awkwardly, like an underbred school-girl. He threw her countless balls of conversation and she did not pick up one. Certainly, she was the most stupid, the most uninteresting young woman he had ever met with, he thought; and talking to her was simply a waste of good material. He lapsed into silence, and she was too grateful for the respite to disturb it; when, turning round on her, he said with an affected little laugh:

"Have you heard anything, Miss Kemball, of this silly affair between my boy and Miss Drummond?"

Patricia felt as if he had struck her somewhere about the heart.

"Yes," she said in a low voice.

"What do you know?"

What was she to answer? Truth certainly; but was the whole truth part of her duty? Her uncle's last words, "Never betray a friend," flashed into her mind. Come what would, she would not betray Dora.

"That Mr. Lowe came to Mr. Hamley to-day about Dora," she answered, after a pause.

"Mr. Hamley told you that?"

"Yes."

"With comments?"

"I do not understand you," said innocent Patricia.

"No?" The Colonel smiled with a bland, superior kind of smile. "Did he make any remark—tell you anything but the mere fact that my boy had asked him for Miss Drummond's hand?"

"He said he had not money enough to marry on," said Patricia.

"And Miss Drummond assented?"

Another pause, during which the downcast face took on itself all colours and all expressions.

"Miss Drummond assented?" repeated the Colonel.

"Yes," said Patricia.

"She allowed that my boy had not enough to marry on?"

"Yes," she said again.

"Did she acquiesce quietly, or did she cry or rave?" laughed Colonel Lowe, as if it was a farce he was rehearsing.

"Acquiesced quietly," said Patricia, but in so low

a voice he had to bend his ear to her lips; and even then he made her repeat the words more distinctly.

“And she made no scene, you say?”

He went over the ground again like the Christy Minstrels.

“No.”

“Did not cry?”

“No.”

“Took it quietly?”

“Yes.”

“Quite agreed with Mr. Hamley that the thing was absurd? not to be thought of? insane?”

“I don’t know that she said all that,” said Patricia, looking up.

“Still, she did agree with him?” persisted her tormentor.

“She said they could not live on nothing,” said Patricia.

“And she is prepared to give him up?”

Patricia was silent.

“Why not answer me, dear Miss Kembal? The question is surely not so difficult. Is she or is she not prepared to give up my boy?”

“I do not know,” said Patricia. Then with the courage of desperation she cried, “It is scarcely fair to cross-question me in this manner, Colonel

Lowe. I have nothing to do with the affair, and do not want to have anything to say to it."

"Your resolution comes rather late in the day, my dear Miss Kemball," replied the Colonel maliciously. "You have given me all the information I required, and," laughing, "I must say that you have made the most surpassing witness. Transparency is an inestimable quality. Good evening, and ten thousand thanks. You have made my way so clear to me ! I doubt though," laughing again, "if your friend Dora, as you call her, will be so much obliged to you as I am."

Lifting his hat, the Colonel turned sharply away, leaving Patricia with the feeling of having betrayed her trust and done her friend some mysterious mischief—she who would have done anything in the world but dishonour to have served her !

There was no time to speak to Dora before dinner, for in truth Dora avoided her. She knew that she would some day have to "fight it out" over those little answers of hers to Mr. Hamley, but she was not in the mood now. She wanted her faculty of invention and all her brains for a graver purpose than convincing a stupid girl, as she mentally called her friend, that deceit was virtuous and lying a better thing than truth. So the

dinner came, and Patricia had been able to give no hint.

"What an extraordinary companion you chose for your walk home!" said Mrs. Hamley, when the servants had left the room after dinner. Bignold had enlightened her as to the young lady's nefarious proceedings.

"I did not choose him; he chose me," said Patricia.

"And you had no power of rejection?" returned Aunt Hamley. "Pardon me, that is the privilege of all ladies, and one that can always be exerted. When it is not used, it is presumably because it is not desired."

"If you mean, aunt, that I wanted Colonel Lowe to walk with me, I did not," said Patricia hastily. "I do not like him well enough."

Her aunt put on her smile of frosted graciousness; Dora looked up with a rapid glance of anger and astonishment; Mr. Hamley's colour deepened, and he turned his keen eyes on his wife's niece viciously.

"So!" he said; "you tramp about the country with that blackguard bankrupt, do you? Upon my word, young lady, your tastes are not remarkably refined for an admiral's grand-daughter."

"I do not know what you mean," said Patricia,

lifting her head defiantly. "I meet Colonel Lowe at the house of friends, and I go with you yourselves to his own house. I do not see that I am unrefined, or anything else that is bad, for speaking to him civilly and walking on the same side of the way with him."

"Don't be impertinent, Patricia," said Mrs. Hamley. "Your uncle has a right to remonstrate with you. And in the present condition of affairs between the two houses I must say I think your conduct both unfeeling and indelicate."

"Aunt, how could I possibly help it?" cried Patricia with warmth. "How could I, a mere girl as I am, be impertinent to a man of Colonel Lowe's age? He said he would walk home with me when I got up to go; what could I say to prevent him?"

"I wish you were always so considerate to the superior claims of age and understanding," said Mrs. Hamley. "As I said before, Patricia, you are of those who carry their virtues abroad and wear only their faults at home."

"Was Lowe at Fletcher's?" asked Mr. Hamley.

So soon as he got on the trail of facts he left the badgering of the girl to a future occasion.

"Yes, he called while I was there," said Patricia. She was almost grateful for the diversion.

"Did he say anything about to-day's pretty kettle of fish?"

"Not there, that I heard," she answered.

"Not there; then he did elsewhere?"

"Only to me."

"Oh! 'only to me,' did he? And what might he have said 'only to me'?" asked Mr. Hamley with a mixture of mockery and banter.

"Not much," answered Patricia.

It was the most diplomatic answer she had ever given. But it did not succeed. Mr. Hamley rose from his seat, large, parabolic, majestic. He walked over to Patricia, took her wrists in one hand, and turned up her face by the chin with the other.

"Look me in the face, young lady," he said in a deep voice; "no subterfuges—I'm not the man for them. What *did* this bankrupt, this beggar, say to you to-day? Answer straight, or——"

"Leave the girl alone, Mr. Hamley, you frighten her," said Mrs. Hamley.

"No, aunt," answered Patricia proudly, "he does not frighten me. I have done nothing to be ashamed of. Let go my hands, Mr. Hamley. While you hold them I will not open my lips."

He unclosed his thick fingers.

"Now tell your tale," he said.

"I have none," said Patricia, looking at her aunt, not at Mr. Hamley. "Colonel Lowe asked me if we had been told of his son's call to-day, and I said yes, we had. Then he asked if Dora cried, and I said no"—("You vile wretch!" said Dora under her breath, looking at her with a sweet little smile)—"and if she acquiesced in the decision, and I said yes."

"You are the most detestable animal I know! I will repay you for this," said Dora, *in petto* again.

"You spoke like a sensible girl," said Mr. Hamley aloud.

"Then you might have spared yourself the trouble of coming over to me, and me the indignity of your touch, Mr. Hamley," cried Patricia, with a sudden burst of angry contempt that was like anything in the world but herself, as she started to her feet, wiping her hands and wrists as if from the soil of his grasp.

"You should not have provoked him," was Mrs. Hamley's reply to her; but to her husband she said, "You ought not to have touched her, Mr. Hamley. She was not a thief who was going to run away!"

And she spoke as tartly to the one as to the other.

But Patricia did not hear her. For the first time in her life she was madly passionate, for the first time felt insulted and outraged. As she stood there flushed and rigid, her head thrown back, her nostrils dilated, her eyes large and fixed, and her bosom heaving, she became suddenly a new person among them all. Hitherto she had been just an innocent, amiable, clumsy, and guileless child whom they had bullied and ridiculed at their pleasure—whom indeed, they had found it rather amusing to bully, she was so sorry, so surprised, so candid and responsive! Now she was a woman whose self-respect was fairly roused—an antagonist prepared to defend herself.

Mr. Hamley saw he had gone too far.

"Friends, my dear?" he said, offering his hand.

Patricia folded hers within each other, and kept a scornful silence.

"Don't be silly, child!" cried Aunt Hamley crossly. "I declare this violence of yours, these vulgar noisy scenes, will make me quite ill. Shake hands, I say!"

"I cannot!" flashed out Patricia. "I have not forgiven you, Mr. Hamley, and I cannot pretend that I have."

"Do you know what I would do with you if you were my niece?" asked Mr. Hamley quite gravely.

The girl made no answer at first. Seeing that one was waited for, she said, still in the same excited, passionate voice: "I do not know, and I do not care; and thank heaven I am not your niece!"

Mrs. Hamley looked aghast, and Dora's face mirrored hers. But Mr. Hamley burst into a coarse laugh.

"Bravo, my dear!" he cried. "Splendid! What a performer you would have made! Well, thank heaven too on my side, as I may say, that you are not my niece! I'd as lief have a tiger cub! But if you were, I'd kiss you well, and see if you would not forgive me then!"

He made a step forward as if to put his threat into execution, when Patricia caught up a knife. It was only a silver dessert-knife; but she did not know that.

"If you touch me I will stab you!" she said. And she looked what she said.

The scene was never forgotten. From that hour it became a Hamley tradition that Patricia only wanted opportunity to develop into a murderess, and that her temper was simply fiendish. But strange to say Mr. Hamley seemed both to like and respect her more than he had ever done before; and many times privately expressed his opinion that the

girl had something in her if it could only be properly brought out. And he was the man to do it.

The next morning however, the night having brought good counsel, Patricia went up to him at breakfast, and held out her hand. Very pretty she looked with that frank penitence on her fine face, and her eyes a little moist with shame and the effort she was making.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Hamley," she said, "that I was so cross last night; and I hope you will forgive me."

"Oh, don't mention it I beg," answered Mr. Hamley with magnanimous acceptance. "We all get put out at times. Even I myself am not always up to what I call high-water mark. But you certainly did take me a little aback, a-wanting to stab me with a silver dessert-knife!" He laughed noisily, and struck out his limbs as his manner was.

"I thought it was steel," said Patricia simply.

Then she turned to Aunt Hamley.

"And I ought to ask you to forgive me too, dear aunty," she said tenderly; "I had no right to make such a scene before you."

"No, you had not, Patricia," returned her aunt. "A young lady, my niece, talking of stabbing her

uncle indeed! What is the world coming to, I wonder, when such horrors as this are tolerated?"

Patricia looked down. She did really look very sorry for her sin, and her child-like confession touched Mrs. Hamley's heart. It was the kind of thing she liked: a moral bending of the stiff young neck, and putting it under her own feet, that just suited her.

"Well, my dear, now that you are sorry, we may as well say forget and forgive—hey, Lady?" said Mr. Hamley, who did not want for a certain coarse good-nature, especially towards women. "Come, give me a kiss, and make up."

"I will make up, but I will not kiss you," said Patricia gravely.

"Absurd! why should you not kiss your uncle?" cried Mrs. Hamley, who yet was angry with her husband for asking this grace, and who would not have been more pleased had Patricia obeyed than she was now when she refused.

"I have never kissed any man but my own dear uncle," said Patricia, her voice sad and low; "and," lifting her eyes, "Gordon."

"Gordon! Who is Gordon?" cried Aunt Hamley.

"Gordon Frere—my Gordon," she answered.

"Oh!" said Aunt Hamley wearily, "more complications! Here is a love-affair now! Go to your place, child, do, and don't keep the breakfast waiting any longer! How I wish you were as sensible as Dora there. It is a positive relief to look at her, so quiet and amiable and well-bred as she is! You will be the death of me before I have done with you, and then I suppose you will be satisfied."

This was the first time Aunt Hamley had heard of Gordon, and she took care not to inquire more. If she should ever have favourable views for her niece, it would be the better policy to know nothing inimical to them; and she dreaded rather than courted information and confession on the subject of an undesirable young man—for he must be that if Patricia had picked him up of her own motion at that awful Barsands!

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERY.

THE next meeting between the two young lovers was a stormy one. Dora had written to Sydney to tell him how she had wept when Mr. Hamley told her what had happened; how she had besought him to be more merciful; how she had expressed her determination to be faithful unto death:—and Colonel Lowe took back Patricia's version, which somehow sounded like truth and carried with it conviction.

So that when the next meeting came there was but little love to cheer them in the darkness of their circumstances and the blackness of the night. Sydney made Dora responsible for Mr. Hamley's insolence, and she made him responsible for his own failure. He reproached her with her double dealing—playing into the hands of the enemy, according to the account given by Patricia; she

tossed her small head disdainfully, asked him how he could be so dense as not to see that this was a blind to be adopted merely in public?—and assured him, with the half-reluctance of virtue wrongfully accused and too proud to vindicate itself, that she had really wept and besought as she had said, but in private and to Mr. Hamley alone.

“Do you think I would have made a scene?” she asked with a fine irony; “that would not be quite like me!”

But Sydney was not satisfied; and they walked in the cold dark shrubbery, and quarrelled without ceasing; and when it began to rain, they went into the shelter of the conservatory and quarrelled there. They were like creatures caught in a net, both the one and the other; and the thing they had called love, which had brought them there, had suddenly turned bitter in their mouths and heavy on their hands. Sydney had but one cry, “Money—I must have money!” and Dora but one answer, “I cannot help you.”

Then Sydney flung Miss Manley and her five thousand per annum in Dora’s face, and claimed her gratitude for the sacrifice; and Dora brandished the potentiality of my Lady Merrian in his, were she free

to encourage those who only asked leave to seek. But when she said this Sydney became furious, and vowed he would take her away in the sight of all men, carry her to a garret in London and slow starvation, rather than have any one else trenching on his rights, and paying attention to the woman who was his property.

And when he said this he frightened her, and made her cry; the threat of confessing their marriage being, of all the misfortunes possible to be encountered, the one most formidable to her, the most terrible. Things were bad enough as they were, with that compelling service at St. Pancras last October and Lord Merrian riding over to Abbey Holme to discuss the Music of the Future and look admiringly into her eyes! Things were bad enough indeed, with the leisurely repenting closing up so sternly on the hasty marriage. All that could be done however, to mitigate the disaster into which they had plunged themselves was to maintain silence and secrecy; to keep their own counsel absolutely unshared; and to trust to chance and time for their better direction.

Dora did not tell Sydney that Patricia had found out their secret. She reserved this for an occasion when it might be of use to her. She knew as well

as any one the value of a stone in the sleeve, and she was an adept in the art of keeping hers unsuspected and always handy.

So they quarrelled and made up again; talked and pouted, and then kissed each other; and Dora now cried and now lisped, and sometimes drove Sydney frantic with her seductions, and sometimes just as frantic the other way with her provocations. But before the young man left the main object of his visit had been accomplished; Dora had gone back to the house, had looked into Mrs. Hamley's work-table drawer where she knew the lady had placed a rouleau of ten new bright sovereigns received from Mr. Hamley that morning, and of which drawer she had a key that would fit; had come out again, and had put that rouleau into Sydney's hands, half laughing and half crying. The cleverness of the trick amused her, but she resented the screw under the pressure of which she had made herself a thief.

"There will be an awful row when this is found out!" she said to Sydney. "I cannot think how it will be got over."

"Oh, you are so clever, you can devise something," he answered.

"I don't see why I should devise anything!" she

said; "Mrs. Hamley will not suspect me, why can't I leave it alone?"

"I leave the ways and means to you," laughed Sydney; "only don't risk your own dear little neck!"

"Much you would care if I did!" she said petulantly.

"Oh yes, I should, Dody! Little fool, as if I did not love you," he answered tenderly.

But Dora was in no humour to be coaxed. She drew herself away from his arms, saying, "Don't, Sydney! I don't like it!" as if she was quite unused to his methods, and found his love-making reprehensible as well as strange.

"You cross little thing, I'll be hanged if I ever come to see you again!" said Sydney rudely.

"And I am sure I wish you would not. I don't see much pleasure in coming out such weather as this to be quarrelled with!" was Dora's snappish answer.

And with the word she hurried away and ran back into the house; and Sydney nearly got them both into trouble by the loud voice with which he called out "Dora!" and which struck upon Mr. Hamley's ear just as he awakened.

As he heard nothing more, though he sat up in

bed to listen, he concluded that a dream had played the usual trick of dreams with him, and turned himself round with a smile on his sleepy face.

"Little beauty, my life would be a blank without her!" he said, just as Dora crept up the last flight of stairs, and stole along the carpeted passage to her own room; revolving in her mind how she should act to-morrow when Mrs. Hamley came to the knowledge of her loss—whether to prepare the way for suspicion or let things take their course without intermeddling. By the time she was undressed she had matured her plans, and to-morrow would see them executed.

The next day Alice Garth was in the drawing-room with the two girls, settling some work for her young mistress. Mrs. Hamley had gone into the housekeeper's room to arrange the day's commissariat; for she was her own head housekeeper, with cook to help rather than to rule; and her work-table drawer was standing about a quarter of an inch open.

"Patricia, dear, will you just open that drawer and give me a skein of blue silk I believe you will find there?" said Dora. "I am sure Mrs. Hamley will let me have it."

"You are sure she will not mind my touching

her things?" asked Patricia half reluctant. Her fear of her Aunt Hamley was deepening to quite a wholesome extent; and in her state of earnest desire not to offend again, since her outbreak over the silver dessert-knife, she was learning a tact almost as nice as Dora's own.

"Oh, certain!" lisped Dora. "Of course not, else I would not have asked you," laughing; "it is just in front, I know."

Patricia opened the drawer, and moved one or two things discreetly.

"I see no skein of blue silk, Dora," she said.

"You dear little blind eyes!" laughed Dora, whose fair face was rather flushed this warm spring-like day. "Here, Alice, do you go and help Miss Kemball to find it."

Alice flung her work over her arm, and went to the drawer; lifting a few things also discreetly, but perhaps a little more with the tips of her fingers than Patricia; but neither could she see the skein of blue silk; and then Dora said good-humouredly—she was such a pleasant young lady to serve—

"Never mind, then. I must say you are one as blind as the other, but it does not signify; and perhaps Mrs. Hamley has taken it away."

So the subject like the search dropped, and pre-

sently Dora found the skein in her own work-box, and laughed lightly at the incident.

Then Alice left the room with her patterns and her instructions, and Mrs. Hamley returned from the offices, her duties as the châtelaine ended for the day so soon as she should have paid cook's bill, for which she had the money ready packed.

She opened her work-table drawer and looked in, specially moving a black and gold needle-case which Dora had made for her years ago; the child's first piece of well-conducted fancy-work, and for which she had the maternal fondness that hallows the early work of children. She looked twice, thrice, and all about the drawer; then she muttered, "How extraordinary!" and looked out into the room as if considering.

Dora watched her furtively without seeming to do so. Patricia, to whom the drawer and the skein of blue silk and the black and gold needle-case had no more significance than so many unnumbered dominoes, had her head in the French grammar; covering the lines with her hand, which she brought down a step gradually as she repeated in a whisper to herself, "*Je souffre, tu souffres, il souffre,*" and so on. Mrs. Hamley, still with her look of deep consideration, of searching back in her memory, and

general bewilderment of mind, left the room silently, but after a time came in again and once more turned over the things in her drawer.

"How extraordinary!" she murmured again, and looked with a kind of perplexed ill-temper at both the girls.

The two tranquil faces she scanned so curiously told her nothing. Dora, with a pretty little smile of loving recognition on her small fresh lips, looked up from her work as guileless as the dove that was her favourite emblem. Patricia was staring vacantly at the ceiling, repeating with praiseworthy diligence: "*Je souffrirai*," and "*nous souffrirons*."

What had either to do with the mysterious displacement or loss out of the little work-table drawer? What could either have to do with it? Mean and irritating in small things, Mrs. Hamley had a certain dignity of action on large occasions. Her temper was more in fault than her heart; and though she did not scruple to make her housemates unhappy, she would not willingly have wronged them. It seemed to her an insult she could not possibly offer to ask either, such good girls as both were, if they knew in any way of her loss. How could they? She remembered now that only Dora was in the drawing-room yesterday when she

put the roll away ; what then could Patricia possibly know of it ? Besides, was not the one as absolutely clear as the other ?

She was perplexed and distressed, and on Patricia's going out of the room to get a dictionary, she looked at Dora wistfully—Dora, her dear child, her consoler in all her little afflictions ;—and Dora went over to her at once, and kneeling by her, said prettily :

“ You look disturbed, dear. Have you lost anything ? or heard any bad news ? ”

“ The most wonderful thing has happened, Dora ! —I cannot make it out ! ” answered Mrs. Hamley. “ I put a roll of gold in here yesterday, and now it has gone.”

“ Gone ? Oh ! how strange ! Why, how can it have gone ? ” said Dora, putting the tips of her fingers into the drawer as if they were magnets, and the missing sovereigns stray filings. “ You surely must have overlooked it, dear.”

“ No, I have not. I have moved everything—searched thoroughly,” she answered.

“ I never heard of anything so odd. What can have become of it ? ” said Dora, moving thimbles and reels to make sure that the roll of gold had not lost itself in the shadow. “ Do you think it can have

got behind the drawer? Let me take it out and look. No!" she cried, as she peered carefully into the hollow, "there is nothing there! How very odd!"

"Who can have taken it?" said Mrs. Hamley. "No one ever goes to my drawer, and it is always kept locked; and we have no one in the house that I could possibly suspect. To be sure there's the new kitchen-maid, but she could not know of it."

"No, no one could know of it," said Dora reflectively. Then suddenly, as if the remembrance of an unimportant event which might have important issues had just struck her, she told Mrs. Hamley how Patricia and Alice Garth had looked in for a skein of blue silk which Alice wanted for her work, and which she thought was there. They did not touch the things, she went on to say with a fine earnestness of advocacy that pleased Mrs. Hamley. They did no harm, she was sure of that; and they could not have interfered with the roll at all. It might by some strange chance have caught in their fringes or sleeves; but then it would have fallen on the carpet, and she and they must have heard it. It was not there too, as she found by moving the chairs and footstools, sofas and tables, to the remotest corner of the room. She was indefatigable in her exertions, and Mrs.

Hamley thought how good and sympathetic she was.

"Well, I don't suppose either of them took it on purpose—stole it, in fact," said Mrs. Hamley sharply. But she said to her own heart, "How I wish Patricia had not left the room as she did!"

"No, I suppose not," said Dora quietly. "Of all three, Patricia, Alice, or myself, I should as soon suspect one as the other."

"But in any case I will not allow my things to be touched," Mrs. Hamley said with temper. She was getting cross now, and Dora's diligence in search was losing its effect. "You ought to have prevented them, Dora; you know how particular I am, and how much I dislike to have my things interfered with and pulled about."

"Yes, dear; I know I was wrong; I should have stopped them," said Dora. "But I assure you they did nothing more than just look into the drawer."

"We will say no more about it," said Mrs. Hamley, with a sudden greyness on her face. "It is one of those mysteries I do not like to think of, and that no thinking can make clear. Tell me though, who went to the drawer first?"

"Patricia."

"And then Alice Garth?"

"Yes, then Alice."

"What can that girl be about!" said Mrs. Hamley irritably.

"Who, dear?" asked Dora.

"Patricia; where is she?"

"She went out of the room for a book, I dare say. She was learning a French verb, I know."

"I wish she would come back!" said Mrs. Hamley, and fretfully re-arranged the work-table drawer.

"Shall I go and call her?" suggested Dora.

But Mrs. Hamley said "No," and re-arranged the things with redoubled energy. Suddenly she said, "Go to the maids' room, Dora, and ask Alice if she has found anything in her sleeves or hanging about her anywhere. Do not tell her what I have lost, but just ask her."

"Yes, dear," said obedient Dora, gliding swiftly and noiselessly from the room.

When she had gone Patricia came back, holding on by a huge French dictionary which she was carrying in the old cushion and kitten fashion, under her arm.

"Where have you been, child?" asked Mrs. Hamley very sharply.

"In the library, aunt, looking for this," said Patricia, startled at her tone.

"What a time you have been! Come to the fire—getting cold in this way!"

"I am not cold at all, aunt, thank you. There was a large fire in the library," she answered pleasantly.

"Come here, I say!" reiterated Aunt Hamley in an authoritative manner.

And Patricia, wondering, went.

"Not cold, your hands are like ice!" said Aunt Hamley, touching her as she passed; "and, good gracious, child, what do you keep in your pocket?" she added. "It bulges out like a schoolboy's. What have you in it? stones or nuts and apples, or what?"

"Something of everything," laughed Patricia colouring.

"Let me see," said Aunt Hamley in a low voice, trembling.

"Dear aunt, yes, if you like. I have no secrets," said the girl, tumbling out into her aunt's lap a heterogeneous collection of the most extraordinary odds and ends a girl could possibly get together: string, wax, a foot-rule that folded in three, a screw, a few white pebbles which Gordon had given to her as possible agate or white cornelian, a huge buck-horn-handled knife of the kind called in the north

jackylegs, or joctelegs, two pocket-handkerchiefs, and a pair of garden-gloves. No wonder her pocket bulged !

For the unwomanliness of the collection, and its disorderly character, Patricia got a severe lecture ; but Aunt Hamley found not a trace of what she sought. It was horrible to have had even this momentary suspicion, but what could she do ? She was confronted with the undeniable fact that her ten sovereigns had been abstracted, and that no one had been near the place where they were save Patricia and a steady, good, modest girl, the daughter of a yeoman farming his own land, who was almost as far above suspicion as her niece. If she had allowed her mind to wander into the depths for a moment, who could blame her ? A rouleau of gold cannot go out of a drawer without hands, and the police always say, " Look for the thief where you least suspect."

So she reflected and tried to soothe her conscience for having dreamed of suspecting her niece only to fall on to the other horn of the dilemma, when at night she told the whole circumstance to her husband, and asked him what he thought.

" Alice Garth," he said. " Make your mind easy, Lady, that young woman is the thief. I am not a

magistrate for nothing, and I know the whole rat-hole of them pretty well by now. Keep your eyes open, Lady, and I'll wager my best hat that you'll find her out before long. She's no good, that girl; and my word is, 'Troop!'

"You might express your word with a little more refinement, Mr. Hamley," said his wife primly; "your counsel is always valuable, but I cannot say I always admire the manner in which you give it."

"Matter goes before manner," said Mr. Hamley sententiously; "and them as has a rough diamond need not be ashamed of it because it ain't polished. A diamond's a diamond, rough or smooth; that is what I say, and I think I am not so far out."

"You might attend a little more to my instructions, I think," said Mrs. Hamley. "'Them as has'—'ain't'—how often I have told you of these errors!"

"Beg pardon, Lady; won't do it again till next time," Mr. Hamley answered jocularly. "He is a bad boy, I dare say; but he isn't bad to his missis."

Mrs. Hamley made no reply. She was weary and distressed; glad to have no shadow of case against her niece, but sorry that Alice Garth should have presumably failed so fearfully; perplexed what to do between want of proof and strong suspicion. She held the crime in horror, and wished to banish the

criminal forthwith, but she was haunted by the dread of accusing the innocent; and yet, if not Alice, who could it have been?

Mr. Hamley however, cut the matter very short. He was not sorry to make James Garth eat dirt in the face of the congregation; and to dismiss his daughter without a character and at a moment's notice was as good a means to this end as any that occurred to him. The next morning then, he summoned Alice into the awful sanctuary of his library, and without a word of reproach or explanation, handed her her wages, salary, and board wages, calculated to a fraction, for the next month, and told her to pack up her boxes and be off before the clock struck twelve.

She was a pretty, fair-haired, delicate girl, with large light-grey eyes and large pupils; a nervous girl, with a spirit, proud of her honesty, proud of her fair fame, and a lady in her degree. She was warmly attached to her good-natured young mistress and passionately fond of her father; a girl as pure in mind, as refined in feeling, and as incapable of low vice as if she had been a duke's daughter; and this sudden dismissal struck her at all points. What would her father say? What would the world think?

Quivering with nervous pain, she asked in a suffocated voice, "What is this for, sir?" her poor hands clasped in each other, and her sensitive face blanched and drawn.

Mr. Hamley waved his hand. He did not look up. He did not like to give pain to women, especially pretty young women, so he did not care to look at the pitiful face which he knew was looking so beseechingly into his. Had she been a lady indeed, he could not have done it; but a maid-servant—that was different. Mr. Hamley was not the man to fly in the face of Providence and blaspheme caste; and it was scarcely necessary for the master of Abbey Holme to trouble himself about the sorrows or the wrongs of a yeoman's daughter, his paid and hired servant. Still he did not care to look at her.

"I make no remark," he said; "I say nothing. We may have suddenly resolved to alter our establishment; a thousand things may have happened. The upshot that concerns you is—here is your money and you must go."

It was beating against a stone wall to stay then and try to soften Mr. Hamley; he had set his face like a flint, and had he been Rhadamanthus in person he could not have been more impenetrable, more immovable.

One eager gaze into the coarse fixed face convinced her. Gathering up her pride through all her sick despair, without a word she turned away with a dazed expression like one suddenly brought from darkness to the light, and went out staggering. Patricia was crossing the hall as she came out of the study, holding on by the wall and creeping round, almost unable to drag herself along.

"Alice! what is the matter?" she cried, laying her hand on the girl's arm.

Alice looked as if she did not understand her; and Patricia seeing that something was gravely wrong, and frightened at her face, took her upstairs into her own room, more than half carrying her, and placed her in the easy-chair she herself so much despised; then she bathed her face and made her drink some water, and by degrees got the story from her.

Story indeed there was none; simply the bare uncompromising fact of a sudden dismissal without cause of complaint or reason assigned.

"It is an infamy!" cried Patricia warmly. "Mr. Hamley is a monster! But you must not mind, dear Alice, good Alice! You will find friends, and he will never have a blessing! Here!" she said as a sudden thought struck her; "take

a note to Miss Fletcher and see what she says. Whatever she says will be right," she added, with the relieved look of one who has found a way of escape in a difficulty, and a sure guide in danger.

She sat down and wrote a rapid little note to her friend, begging her to see Alice Garth and to talk to her and comfort her; saying that she was a good girl and had no faults, and ought not to have been sent away. After which she emptied her purse into the lap of the disgraced maid, who hated to take her money for many reasons, but was fain for the greater good there is sometimes in compliance than in self-assertion; and for her farewell she put her arms round her neck and kissed her as she might have kissed a sister; which opened the founts and sent poor Alice into a fit of crying that culminated in hysterics, and taxed both Patricia's skill and patience.

If Aunt Hamley had only known that her niece had kissed a servant! Of a truth Miss Fletcher's democratic example was bearing fruit!

But Mr. Hamley had his own trial to bear after this sudden assumption of domestic power. Mrs. Hamley, who never allowed interference in her kingdom, made his life a burden to him for days and weeks. Bignold, her maid, who had to work

double tides—dear Dora being utterly incapable of dressing herself, and Patricia with the best will in the world not being sufficiently deft to help—in her turn made her mistress's life a burden to her; and all Dora's tact and self-control, and natural good nature, were taxed to the utmost to keep her tiring-woman tolerably civil or efficient. It was a hard time for them all, the innocent as well as the guilty; but Mr. Hamley took care not to show he felt the ground-swell that he had raised, and, in his malicious glee at having wounded James Garth through his daughter, bore with the Lady's pin-pricks like a stoic. They were cheap at the price, he thought. Perhaps if he had known that Catherine Fletcher had taken Alice into her service out of hand, not letting her go home even for an hour, but adopting her then and there without inquiry as to why she was dismissed, and without the formality of asking for her character, he would not have thought his daily annoyances so cheap. There would be a breeze, as he phrased it, when he came to know it.

Not that Miss Fletcher much regarded the chance or the reality of a breeze, when the question was one of kindness or conscience. She believed in Alice, whom she had known from childhood; and when the girl told her with tears that she was

entirely ignorant of any cause whatever why she should have been dismissed, that she had done nothing, said nothing, been just as she always was, and that the whole affair was a mystery from beginning to end, that no shadow of reason had been assigned, and no complaint of anything wrong in the house which might have been fastened on her made public, Catherine accepted her statement implicitly.

"Take off your bonnet," she said, "and stay here. You have come at the right time. I am wanting a cook, for Jane is to be married soon—is only waiting indeed, till I am settled with her successor. You cannot cook, you say? Never mind! I will teach you. Lady's-maid or parlour-maid or whatever you may be, Alice, you are a woman first of all, and therefore ought to know how to cook," she added smiling. "A woman who cannot cook is like a man who cannot handle a tool; a helpless creature with only half her faculties. There is nothing like being able to do everything; so now, my dear, you are engaged here as cook, and you can go home this evening and tell your mother of the change."

CHAPTER XII.

BIDDEN TO THE QUEST.

MILLTOWN society, such as it was, always profited by the advent of the family at the Quest—"the Dovedales," as certain of the upper people called them, with a fine assumption of elemental equality, and a public announcement that they considered themselves of the same flesh and blood as even an earl and countess; or "my lord and lady," as others styled them, with a reverential abasement of the inner man, and a humble confession that a nobleman has different physiological constituents from plain John Smith, and that in all the qualities which make up womankind my lady the countess is not the same kind of creature as Joan the drudge. Well, the Dovedales being human and not silly, were neighbourly people in their way, and placed a good deal of their religion in the exact performance of their social duties. Hence they stirred up the

society about Milltown and the adjacent parts, and gave œcumenical entertainments to which all the visitable people were generously invited.

This did not prevent their being the proudest people on the face of the earth for their own parts. But their very pride enabled them to condescend with that perfection of art which conceals itself; and as no amount of condescension could raise others or lower themselves to the same level, they were always gracious because never afraid.

They gave weekly dinner-parties, and had their sets rigidly arranged. And among others they had one set of which the Lowes and the Fletchers formed part, and in which this year, for the first time, the Hamleys were invited. This was the most democratic thing the Dovedales had ever done; but even they felt themselves compelled to float with the incoming plutocratic tide, and pay their homage to wealth when they met it. And as Mr. Hamley had the reputation of being even richer than he was—furiously rich, some one said—and as Mrs. Hamley at all events was a gentlewoman by birth, the democracy involved in the invitation was reduced to a minimum, and what was left was exalted into a virtue by that sacred shibboleth, “the obligations of our position.” Wishing however, to get as

much pleasure out of their virtue as might be, they formally asked the two pretty girls as well as the elders, and took care to have their particular Milltown set on a day when only a few nobodies were staying at the Quest; who nevertheless were nobodies with names and places, and thus made a show for the dazzling of the natives. Generally the fine ladies staying there, not being bound to condescension by any exigencies of local position, took no active part in these democratic feasts of sacrifice. They looked critically at the women, whom they invariably pronounced bad style; and though they might have been friendly enough over the vol-au-vent and the chartreuse with the gentlemen belonging, kept aloof in the drawing-room when they had to remember their dignity and what was owing to themselves. But this is the way with women. They will flirt to shamelessness with Dick, but they will not know Mrs. Dick. "The men might pass, but it is those badly-dressed women who are so dreadful!" they say among themselves when discussing their social inferiors. And they are right, according to the register of their standards.

It was the fine gentlemen who did all the work; who overlooked the immorality of an exaggerated pattern or a last year's mode, and brought down

their finery to the lower level, like so many Apollos among the goatherds, or Crishnas consorting with the Gopias. Still there was fun, if of a mild kind, to be had out of certain of the provincial Samsons; and it was anticipated to-day that Mr. Hamley would be a rich mine. For all the outside varnish with which his wife had so diligently sought to overlay him these fifteen years, the stuff beneath was as coarse as ever; and the varnish had the habit of not sticking, but of coming off in bursts and showing the original grain as clearly as if it had never been brushed on at all. The owner of Abbey Holme was notorious in his own way; but gilding goes farther than varnish in these days, and even the Dovedales condoned the coarseness of the grain for the sake of the gilt.

It was not a pleasant surprise to either when the Lowes and the Hamleys met in the drawing-room of the Quest. Hitherto Colonel Lowe had regarded this as the one inviolable temple which the old shoe-black of Abbey Holme would never be permitted to penetrate. If he, as one of the leading men of the district, had felt bound to recognise him, as a superior being might recognise the inferior, that was a different thing from being classed with him as equals together by one who was superior to both—bracketed as social equivalents, and fit com-

panions in the same harness. He felt the invitation of his enemy as an insult to himself, and hoped some blessed chance might occur which would give him the opportunity of putting a spoke in the wheel of the Hamley car of triumph, and bringing him to the ditch and the dust.

On his side Mr. Hamley would rather that Colonel Lowe had only heard of his invitation, not been there to witness his acceptance. Not that he cared much about him; but, all things considered, it was awkward, and we do not go out to dine with earls and countesses to be annoyed. If we are to have a helping of gingerbread in mercy's name let us have our share of gilt undefaced! Nevertheless Mr. Hamley bore himself with commendable propriety; and when he came up the long drawing-room with his wife on his arm, and the two pretty girls at his heels, and made his parabolic bows, the coolness with which he ignored the Colonel and his son would have done credit to the most veteran diplomatist.

Perhaps the young people suffered the most. Some weeks had elapsed now since Mr. Hamley had given his ultimatum so distinctly to Sydney, and husband and wife had kept apart since Dora's last secret issue with Mrs. Hamley's roll of ten bright

shining sovereigns in her pocket. Twice had Sydney thrown gravel up to the window, and hooted with such artistic perfection as to madden the neighbouring owls ; but Dora never "showed." She was getting frightened since Mrs. Hamley's seizure and Patricia's discovery. She was getting frightened too, of Sydney himself, now that he had begun to press her for money ; so she did the best she could to keep him quiet and in good humour by writing pretty little notes which she smuggled into the post somehow, generally only after she had intrigued and manœuvred to an extent that might have saved a kingdom. And above all, she and Patricia had seen Lord Merrian some three or four times ; and she had taken to herself the several accidents which had brought them together, and had spent much time in brooding on possibilities, could the past be undone or safely denied.

The meeting then, was by no means pleasant for any one ; and it took all the tact and good breeding of the belligerents not to show that Cragfoot and Abbey Holme had "cut," and that the Quest was less a nest where doves were cooing than a field where dogs would fight if they dared.

It would be useless to give an Homeric catalogue of the guests, or to designate their places. It is

enough to say that Mr. Hamley was in the second place of honour by the Countess; and that Sydney had been told off to Patricia, but had on the other side of him Miss Manley with her indefinite hair, her weak eyes, her freckles, and her camel's lip, her long waist, thin shoulders, and five thousand a year. Immediately opposite, Lord Merrian, between Mrs. Lowe and Dora, represented youth between duty and inclination; but he was too well-bred not to give the chief honours to the elder lady who belonged to him by right; in which he showed himself a better gentleman than Sydney Lowe, who turned his shoulder to Patricia persistently and left her to Dr. Fletcher, while he devoted himself to Miss Manley. He and Dora were having a silent duel across the table, whereby Lord Merrian and Miss Manley benefited.

Never had Dora looked so pretty or behaved with such a perfect imitation of real breeding. She was the belle of the table, not even excepting the gracious Countess, a woman of the mature siren type, who in last season's dresses, magnificent if no longer fresh, looked at forty-five no more than thirty, and who might well have passed for the daughter of her husband and the elder sister of her son. To be sure her maid and the morning saw

what the world did not; but Tongs was a discreet young woman whose sympathies were with pearl-powder, and the Bond Street bills were never published.

As for Patricia, hers was beauty of a kind which does not harmonize so well with the state and glitter of a fashionable dinner-table as with heathy moors and whitening seas. She was a nymph, not a belle; and was more at home in the wild free country than in an assemblage of jewelled dowagers whose estimate of social fitness is about as sharp as the bridge over which Mohammedan souls walk to Paradise—Gehenna yawning below. Set in the midst of the gorgeous array that surrounded her, she shone conspicuous by the simplicity of her manner and her dress; which last however was neither meagre nor ungraceful. The Countess was in a millinery marvel of blue and gold; one of Worth's masterpieces in decadence, deftly caulked and repaired. Dora was in white silk—she looked best in white—cut very low on her shoulders, with lovely little outbursts of pale pink in unexpected places, suggestive of a blush rose—a maiden blush—the white petals of which close round yet just reveal its tender, flushing heart. She wore a single row of large pearls round her throat, and a few blush roses peeped out

coquettishly from among the gold of her shining hair. At Colonel Lowe's her costume had suggested bridal; here, by Lord Merrian's side, it emblemized wooing. The rest of the ladies were in the various shades of mauve and silver, grey, pink, blue, maize and peacock-green, usual to age and complexion; while Patricia was in a thin black material made high to her throat, where it was ruffled with white. No scoldings and no coaxings could induce her to hang herself about with chains, submit to have her ears pierced, pile up her head with false hair or underlying tow, or bedizen herself in any of the ways fashionable at this time. All she could be induced to do was to allow a white camellia to be pinned into her rich brown hair, and to wear another on her bosom. For the rest, her dress had been made by the redoubtable Biggs according to Mrs. Hamley's instructions. Hence it included all the due mysteries of frills and puffs with which modern millinery assails art. For these things she did not care. So long as she might discard ornaments and wear her gowns up to her throat, she let them manage the rest as they would; and even Aunt Hamley had to be content with a compromise.

Perhaps the girl's instinct was right after all, thought Mrs. Hamley; for she certainly looked very

distinguished, even at the Quest, and a different stamp of girl from the rest. There really was something wonderfully noble about her, she thought again, watching her from the extreme end of the table, half in admiration of her appearance, half in fear of her behaviour.

She might have spared herself her pangs, for Patricia was not sufficiently at ease to be spontaneous, so sat with a kind of North American Indian's stillness and dignity of bearing which to the superficial seemed the perfection of good breeding, but to the observant showed her unaccustomedness to the full as much as the soubrette's flush and flutter would have done. She was troubled in more ways than one. She did not like to sit by Sydney Lowe, knowing all she knew; and she did not like to see Dora look at Lord Merrian as she did. She had certain absurd notions about the sacredness of marriage which this kind of transferred fascination did not suit; and she felt as if she was responsible for all she knew, and knowing, condemned. Then she had an uneasy consciousness that certain mysteries, of which she was ignorant, were connected with the arbitrary choice of spoon or fork; and that she was not so well up in the accidence of the dinner-table as might have been. To be sure,

she had been well drilled at Abbey Holme; but to a girl accustomed to eat hunches of bread and meat standing on the deck of a yacht, with the yoke-lines in her hand, the nice minutiae of a perfectly arranged dinner-table are troublesome to learn and difficult to practise.

For one part of her present discomfort however, she had but little reason. Sydney, as has been said, turned his shoulder to her from the beginning of the meal to the end; and Miss Manley's pale-dun face lighted up under his darker fires as it had seldom lighted before. She took quite cheerful views of things for the whole two hours the dinner lasted. In general she was of a desponding turn, and thought life had but little to recommend it to a wealthy, young, unmarried woman, morbidly conscious of her own plainness, haunted by a dread of sharks, deficient in hæmatine, and longing for love but fearing lovers. To be taken possession of by some good, kind Christian soul, who would administer her fortune favourably, treat her personally with chivalrous devotion, take interest in her mild pursuits, and walk with her through life hand in hand—a man to whom a little bad art, a little desultory reading, and a little imperfect botany, were quite sufficient recreations—that was the sum of her

ambition, the highest point to which her visions reached. She had not found such a one yet, and Sydney Lowe had not quite the outside look of her ideal; nevertheless, he drew her magnetically, and she expanded under his attentions like a crumpled, half-dead insect reviving under the sun.

But the person who was decidedly the happiest of the whole assembly this day was Mr. Hamley. To be invited to the Quest had been for years one of the secret points of his not too elevated ambition. He remembered, as if it was only yesterday, when he stood among the obsequious throng crowding the gates at the home-coming of the young earl and his bride. He was out of the barefooted stage then, six-and-twenty years ago, but he was still only a clerk in the concern whereof he was so soon to be sole manager and the prosperous proprietor. And he remembered, as he sat there with my lady's gorgeous blue and gold every now and then rustling against his knees, how this house had been to him like a Paradise, where, could he be once admitted on terms of equality, he should be satisfied. It would be his version of the *Nunc Dimittis*, and he would ask nothing more from fate or fortune. Indeed, neither fate nor fortune could give him anything more. Let them but grant him this one crowning

grace, and he would feel that he had drained the golden cup to the last luscious drop, and left no flower in the Elysian Fields unplucked. So he was satisfied in the present as well as in the past; unctuously, fully satisfied; as he would himself have said, replete with happiness. He knew too, that his being here was disagreeable to the Cragfoot people, over whom it gave him a prospective advantage when the fitting time should come; which would not be long now. He had a bill against Colonel Lowe; it had been running for many a year; but he thought he saw daylight and the payment of his pound of flesh; and he was pleased, now that the first awkwardness had worn off under the influence of the wine and his pleasure at being seated near the Countess—a higher place than the Colonel had!—that they had met as equals at the Quest before he had to give his enemy that lesson he had been waiting so long to deliver. The possession too, of a ladylike, if aged wife, and of ‘the prettiest girls out’ as his maiden satellites, was not without its value. Taken all round, his lot was a grand one this night; and he had courted Fortune with good effect.

Mr. Hamley was a self-made man who had a good deal to say about native worth and all the rest of

it; but he believed in a lord all the same; and he loved him. As he sat by Lady Dovedale and flourished his large hands with their large diamond rings sparkling and flashing in the light, expanded his broad chest with his elaborately embroidered shirt-front, used his finest words, and showed his long white teeth, he was altogether radiant and content, supple and subjugated. Had my lady asked him to commit any baseness in the world not penal, he would have wiped his lips and done it. All the same he was trying to impress her with the sense of his own worth as a man and his solidity as a money-bag—to edge his big shoulder under the delicate fringe of her feathers, that he might force her to recognise his claims to equality.

His version of the family to those of his friends who were not admitted to the heaven of the Quest, was, that lords and ladies were just like other men and women when you came to know them. And he said it in the tone of a discoverer. A deal of nonsense was talked about the aristocracy, he said, by them as had never conversed with a live lord. Those as had got behind the scenes knew better, and he for one could say there was no difference between them and other people when you came to know them. Take the Dovedales, now; my lord

was as free and hearty as his own brother—not a bit of nonsense about him, and with his head screwed on the right way ; and my lady was not only a splendid creature to look at, but as affable and simple as a child. He could do anything with her—just the kind of woman he could manage, like he didn't know what, and twist round his little finger. He mentioned "young Merrian" with approbation, though he did not quite like his manner to young ladies. Still, the lad meant well, he dared say, and at the worst he was but young yet and would improve.

In spite however, of his own exceeding glory, he was not over well pleased at the young lord's evident admiration of dear Dora. Why could he not tackle Patricia ? he thought, as he every now and then came down from his heights and watched them across the flowers and lights. If Patricia now could catch Merrian, he would say grace over that meal ; but Dora—no, he could not part with Dora ! She was his one ewe lamb, and not even for the right of calling across the street : "Hi there ! Merrian my boy, how are you all ?" could he give her up.

Had he watched a little more keenly he would have seen that, though Lord Merrian flirted with

Dora, he was watching Patricia—Patricia talking to Dr. Fletcher with something of her natural animation as the dinner was drawing to a close, and therefore the difficulties of manipulation were lessening, while Sydney's persistent neglect reduced him to the rank of a circumstance only.

Lord Merrian cared nothing for pretty Dora Drummond, but Patricia had touched him deeply. She was the first woman who had appealed to his nobler aspirations, his higher being—who had stirred his soul rather than his blood, captivated his conscience and imagination rather than his vanity or his senses.

He had seen the girl many times, by that lucky kind of intentional accident which befriends young people on the look-out, and though always more demonstrative to Dora, had given his mind most to Patricia. And the more he studied her the more she fascinated him. Nevertheless, he played with Dora; and Dora did not see through the feint. As for Patricia, she understood no more of the meaning there was in the young lord's eyes and tones than she understood the meaning of Hebrew. She talked with him freely, and accepted him in a fraternal kind of way that was delicious in its innocent unconsciousness; but the world cannot judge of

what it does not see, and Mr. Hamley judged only like the world.

Three conversations, each having an esoteric meaning deeper than their words, were going on at the table at the same moment. Of the one, Lord Merrian speaking quietly, took the lead.

"Do you and your cousin ever ride, Miss Drummond? I have only seen you driving."

"Sometimes; not very often; not this winter at all, since Patricia came; but I used to ride with Mr. Hamley."

"Walk?"

"Occasionally."

"Are you a good walker?"

She laughed. "No."

"Is your cousin?"

"Oh yes, magnificent! She can walk as far as a man. She is immensely strong."

"What a splendid place for botanizing the Long Field Lane is!" said Lord Merrian innocently.

"Yes; but there are no flowers out yet," answered Dora, just as innocently.

"Do you think not? I am going to look for some to-morrow," he returned in the same simply indifferent way. "Are you fond of botany?"

"Passionately," said Dora, who called all hawk-

weeds little dandelions, and who did not know that dead-nettles do not sting.

"You had better join forces with me to-morrow, you and your cousin," said Lord Merrian. "We may find some good specimens."

She smiled with the sweetest, most ingenuous little smile in the world. No one could have suspected that it ratified an assignation.

"That would be very nice," she said.

"Agreed?" asked Lord Merrian.

"If you like!" answered Dora.

Opposite, Sydney, with his shoulder well turned to Patricia, had brought his conversation with Miss Manley on to the theme of marriage. He was angry with Dora for her looks and lisplings to Lord Merrian, and he had a kind of fierce desire "to pay her out."

"I should not like to marry any one with money," he said to Miss Manley, a shade of melancholy on his handsome vicious face.

"No?" she answered, playing nervously with her bread.

At this moment she wished that she had not five thousand a-year, but that it stood in Sydney Lowe's name—he looking at her as he looked now.

"No, indeed! I should like the woman I married to be sure of my disinterestedness. If I loved one with money I should like her to put my affection to some stirring test—to drop her glove into the lion's den——"

"Oh! like De Lorge?" interrupted Miss Manley with animation. She was a sentimental young person, and fond of poetry and romance.

"Yes, like De Lorge," said Sydney, casting his intellectual bread on the waters without the faintest idea where it was floating.

"But perhaps she might believe in you without such a test."

Miss Manley spoke hesitatingly. It seemed almost too bold a thing to say, with her heart beating as it did against her gaunt ribs, and her pale-dun cheeks flushed—not becomingly.

"That could be only one who knew me well," said Sydney.

Miss Manley was silent; but Dora read her poor, plain face with tolerable accuracy, just as she herself said "If you like!" to Lord Merrian.

At the upper end of the table Mr. Hamley was discussing politics with the Countess.

"Yes," she said, arranging her lace tucker with

graceful art ; " Merrian will stand for the borough at the next election. I do not anticipate failure ; do you, Mr. Hamley ? "

Mr. Hamley fidgeted. It had been his secret intention to contest the borough himself at the next election ; but how could he say this to her ladyship at her own table, when she had honoured him too, as she had done ?

" Me, my lady ! anticipate failure !—by no manner of means. I should think his lordship safe to succeed," he said with over-acted heartiness.

" He comes in on the right side," said the Countess ; " at least," she continued with her sweetest smile, and she had a very sweet smile, " I trust *you* will say so, Mr. Hamley. A Liberal-Conservative, he is prepared to accept all good reforms, but to resist mere innovations which would only do harm ; and he will keep down with a strong hand noisy agitators who have no one's good at heart save their own."

These were safe platitudes. They defined nothing and bound no man's conscience ; but the Countess said them with unction, and as if they were a programme of the exactest character.

" Bravo, my lady ! we must have you up at the

hustings. You would take the conceit out of us men if you were to make a speech to the people just as you spoke to me now!" cried Mr. Hamley, overflowing at every pore with oily approbation.

"You flatter me," the lady said, smiling; "and I am glad to find you on our side. An intelligent person like yourself is a host at an election, and such a gain to the right cause!"

"I will do my best to secure Lord Merrian's election," said Mr. Hamley proudly. "And I think I have a little influence in my native town. A self-made man as I am, my lady, you see I understand both sides. I know the poor because I remember them when I was one of them; and I know the rich, seeing that I have become what I call a rich man myself. I shall consider it a honour to work for your ladyship's son, and we'll carry him in among us, no fear."

"That is very nice of you," the Countess answered. "Do you know, Mr. Hamley, I had heard that you were such a dreadful radical I was almost afraid of you? I thought that probably you would not come to the Quest at all, if we asked you; and you know we poor sinful aristocrats cannot help being born with titles."

"Heaven forbid you should help it if you could!"

exclaimed Mr. Hamley. "And who could have told your ladyship such an infamous lie as that I was a radical? I assure your ladyship I yield to no man in my love for the respected institutions of our venerated country, and I would not see one of them destroyed; least of all the institution which the Earl and Countess of Dovedale adorn."

"Neatly said," was his own unspoken comment.

"I am sure *now*, you never could have been a horrid radical; why, you are quite a courtier!" said the Countess graciously.

Mr. Hamley laughed and spread out his feet under the table and his hands above it.

"Try me when the election comes on," he said, tossing off his wine.

"I thought he would have been more difficult," was the lady's comment to her husband when the dinner-party had broken up. "But he was too easy. He is a dreadful creature; no bait is too transparent for him, no flattery can be too coarse."

"He is a beast," was the Earl's vigorous reply.

Nevertheless these aristocratic personages did not disdain the promised assistance of the beast, and thought his hand, however coarse and unclean, as good as any other for a political leg-up to their son.

On his side Mr. Hamley fairly swelled with satisfaction. He had been singled out by my lady for special honour and distinction, and the carriage seemed hardly large enough to contain his jubilant pride. All during the ride home it was one incessant round of what my lady had said, and what he had said, and how she had looked, and how he had tried to impress her by his looks back, and what he had eaten, and the beauty of the "set out"—but the wine was inferior to his own, he thought, and the cheese was not ripe enough.

"We'll show them how to do it, Lady, when we have them out at Abbey Holme," he said to his wife, rubbing his hands. "I'm a self-made man, earned sixpence a day once upon a time and lived on it; but I'll give my lord a glass of wine he can't match for all the cobwebs in the Quest cellars."

He was quite frisky in his lumbering elephantine way, and complimented his ladies enthusiastically all round. He was gracious beyond measure to Patricia, to whom he said paternally, "But you should have talked more to my young lord than you did, my dear, mewing yourself up with those old Fletcher birds! I do not approve of bold-faced jigs in young ladies; but Lord Merrian deserves a little nice attention."

He did not add that he had taken occasion to inform Lord Merrian, when the ladies had withdrawn, that he intended to dower his wife's niece handsomely if she married to his liking; but that he had only left his own cousin provided for by will; which he thought was doing the thing as it should be done—the correct card outside and in!

CHAPTER XIII.

THOROUGH.

“**W**HAT a lovely afternoon !”

It was Dora who spoke, standing by the drawing-room window after luncheon ; her enthusiastic admiration directed to a grey sky with flying lead-coloured clouds, and fitful gleams of a watery, greenish-yellow sunlight.

“A lovely day ? my dear, you are surely dreaming !” said Mrs. Hamley. “It is as cold as Christmas, and looks as stormy as November.”

“But it is a nice fresh day for a walk,” said Dora.

Mrs. Hamley stared at the girl who in general was content to sit close “into the fire” through the winter ; and who, when she went out, went out only in a close carriage, well wrapped in wadded silks and dainty furs, with a hot bottle for her feet and a wolf-skin for her knees, and who even then shivered and said, “How cold it is !”

"Has Patricia infected you with her odd liking for snow-storms and east winds?" she asked.

"Perhaps she has!" laughed Dora. "Evil communications, you know, dear. But I cannot tell why, I have quite a longing for a walk this afternoon. I heard you tell Jones you did not want the carriage, else I should not have asked you. But if you are not going out, and have nothing for me to do at home, may we take a walk to-day?"

"Yes, certainly, if you like, my dear," said Mrs. Hamley. Yesterday's dinner at the Quest had sweetened her temper divinely. "Does Patricia want to go?"

"Yes, that is why I have asked you," said Dora without blushing.

She and Patricia had not spoken of it.

"Well, have a nice little walk then—not too far; and come home blooming," said Mrs. Hamley: "my blush-rose and my—I am sure I don't know what to call Patricia—my hollyhock, I think, she is so tall and straight!"

"You clever dear!" said Dora. "I never knew any one so clever as you are. You are so bright and original."

Mrs. Hamley looked pleased.

"There was nothing very clever in that, pussy," she said.

"Oh yes, there was!" cried Dora.

"Ah, that's because you love me, you see, and are prejudiced in my favour," said Mrs. Hamley.

And Dora assented, and said yes, that was true for the one part, but not for all; and love or no love, she was clever and original, and a darling all the same.

"Am I not good to get you this nice walk, you cross old pet?" asked Dora, clasping her hands round the arm of Patricia, whom she dug out of the dark depths of the library.

"Yes, very good, Dora," said Patricia gravely.

"Yes, very good, Dora," laughed Mr. Hamley's fair-haired cousin, mimicking and exaggerating the girl's rather sorrowful voice. "Why, where have all your smiles gone of late? You are as grave as a judge, and as cross—oh! as cross as the cats, as my Irish nurse used to say."

"I am not cross, Dora."

"Yes, you are; you are so cross you do not know how to look like a Christian, not to talk of behaving like one! Well, never mind! Let us go and get our things on now, and we will talk as we go. I say, miss," she added, turning her gracious head

half over her shoulder, "you are quarrelling with your best friend, and very ungrateful to her too, when you go on like this to me! There is no one in the house who cares so much for you as I do, or who tries so hard to make your life pleasant, and to smooth down your thousand and one difficulties. I am always getting into little troubles for your sake; and for my reward you sulk with me as if I was a monster."

"I don't, Dora!" cried Patricia earnestly.

Dora made a little grimace. Had Patricia been a man it would have been a challenge for a kiss. As it was it only made the girl take hold of her by her two shoulders, and look down into her face sorrowfully and lovingly, while she said, "Oh, Dora, you might be an angel if you chose!"

"And I am, I suppose, a"—she coughed—"instead!"

Patricia smiled, and then she laughed.

"Perhaps an angel with one black feather!" she said; and Dora gave her a playful push; whereat they both ran up-stairs to dress, convinced that life was very good, and that a country walk on this grey March day was the most charming thing the world could give.

Long Field Lane was not far from Abbey Holme;

about a mile perhaps ; which, though a mere "step-over" to Patricia, was an expedition for Dora. Moreover, the one dressed in simple single garments which allowed her to keep cool or to get warm as she liked ; the other in multifarious devices of fur and eiderdown, quilting and wadding, which, though making a pretty picture, were hindering. As the time was at hand when Lord Merrian said he should be botanizing about the bare hedges, Dora was anxious to make way ; yet by no means anxious to keep her tryst heated or disordered. For the matter of that she never looked either, even when on rare occasions she felt her golden feathers ruffled and her various artistic arrangements out of gear. And to-day the pretty pink flush on her cheeks, induced by the wind and the walk, only made her the lovelier. Patricia too, looked beautiful. She was still sorrowful—that was the set character of her face now ; but the little playful brush with Dora had brightened her into gladness ; though still and ever the secret unhappiness of her soul broke through the temporary sunshine ; and hers was a face, noble always, to which sorrow gives even a nobler expression.

As they turned out of the main road into the lane they saw at a little distance the tall, well set-up

figure of Lord Merrian coming leisurely along, not botanizing.

"Dora, there is Lord Merrian—how odd!" said Patricia, suspecting nothing.

"So there is!" lisped Dora. "How odd indeed, as you say."

But Lord Merrian, who was not naturally *rusé*, for all he made Dora Drummond his stalking-horse from behind which to observe Patricia, showed so little surprise at seeing them, met them indeed with such an expectant if more than gratified air, that even Patricia was struck by it. Why did he seem as if he knew they were coming? as if he had been waiting for them? That Dora should have made an assignation never occurred to her. She would have thought such an underhand *manœuvre* bad even with Sydney, and knowing all she knew; but for Dora to plot and arrange to meet Lord Merrian? Dora! Had she suspected this she would probably have abjured her society for ever, and have made herself miserable; between hating the sin of the friend she loved, and lamenting her absence, torturing herself far more than the cause or the person merited. As it was, she simply wondered at that quiet air of expectancy in the young lord, and thought that perhaps he had

seen them in some miraculous manner from a distance, and so knew that he should meet them.

"You were right, Miss Drummond ; there are no flowers," he said, after the first greetings.

"I thought none were out yet," she answered.

"Only two," said Lord Merrian.

And Dora laughed, while Patricia looked up and down the hedge and into Lord Merrian's hands to see which two he meant.

That inquiring look delighted him. Dora caught it too, and thought "how dense"—and took honour to herself for her superior quickness ; but Lord Merrian translated it—"how innocent ; how perfect in its sweet unconsciousness ;" and—"how knowing ; how far too clever !"

Nevertheless he smiled at Dora, a little too familiarly perhaps for perfect breeding ; and then he looked at Patricia, and spoke to her with a certain respect and homage of tone and manner very noticeable in its difference.

Dora would rather have had the familiarity. She did not understand the other, and called it coolness ; but she thought Lord Merrian full of friendliness and admiration to herself, and she was glad that she had showed so well. She scarcely knew what she was proposing to herself in all this. She knew

that she could not marry the young earl expectant, if even she was asked to do so ; but it pleased her to sail in troubled waters, managing her little craft with such consummate grace and skill that no one should suspect her seas were not halcyon. She had always been an adept at untying knots ; and her mechanical aptitude emblemized her mental cleverness.

After a while the ball seemed to pass somehow from Dora's hand to-day. In the most natural manner possible Lord Merrian brought the talk round from conventional inanities to deeper things—from literary small talk to moral principles, from newspaper politics to historic meanings. And here Dora was distanced. All she knew of life was its material well-being, its dainty food, its soft attire, the position you held in your society, the dinners you gave, the carriages you kept. She thought it was as well to keep out of doing wrong if you could, and if you could not, then to be careful not to be found out. She liked peace, and she supposed truth the right thing to cultivate when possible. But as it was not possible for the majority, she thought the art of telling lies with coolness and cleverness the most important of all to learn betimes. She blamed those who made the lies necessary, not those who did not dare to tell the truth ; and when she had come to

this, and going to church on Sundays, and speaking softly to her inferiors, and laying herself out for the perpetual propitiation of the authorities, she had her code complete, and held that those who wanted more were inconveniently earnest or stupidly intense.

But where Dora was lost Patricia found herself. Also the thoroughness which Lord Merrian lacked she supplied. Lord Merrian was a man with thoughts higher and nobler than his life. He yearned for the millennium, and was dissatisfied with the present worship of false gods; but he was not one who would go forward to chain the devil, though he faintly cheered on those who did; and while he vilified the ritual, he nevertheless carried his daily sacrifices to Mammon with the rest, contenting himself with lamentation that the world was so bad and that so few were found to make it better. All this was very fine to listen to, but very unsatisfactory to the man's own conscience and to the more earnest of his friends. He felt the weakness of his position, and wished it were otherwise; but the world had him fast in its golden fetters, and he was not strong enough to break them—at least not alone.

Patricia's nature was fashioned on a different plan. With her to believe and to be were identical.

She could not lament a wrong and give in to it. The

tongue to speak and the hand to do must be in harmony; and no golden fetters that the world could forge would be found strong enough to bind her back from the upward path, however difficult, if once her face was set that way, and she knew it as her duty. So that when Lord Merrian, speaking specially to her, began some of his well-expressed and well-worn jeremiads on the injustice of society and the sorrows of the poor, Patricia turned to him with her strong practical impulse.

"But, Lord Merrian," she said, her bright eyes lifted to his face, "you have power to prevent all this misery and injustice on your own estates. If you like you can make your tenants prosperous and happy; it all depends on your own will, and how you choose to employ your money; is it not so? But you will, when you come to reign at the Quest, will you not?"

"Ah, that is just the difficulty! One person can do so little," he said. "And besides, we must not interfere with the natural self-adjustment of the labour market," he added, adopting the current phraseology to excuse the half-heartedness whence it takes its rise. "Say that my father, or I, or both, agreed to lower our rents, give higher wages and better dwellings than our neighbours—than indeed

we find regulated by the conditions of supply and demand—we should be doing an injustice to those of our brother landowners who would not, or let us say could not, do the same as ourselves, and we should be opening a door to all sorts of encroachments from our tenants.”

“I cannot see the first, and I do not believe the last,” returned Patricia. “If you choose to do what is right that cannot be wrong to others. They may not like it because of the contrast; but surely that does not signify! And I cannot believe that the poor would ask for what they ought not to have because they had given to them what they ought.”

“I know all this sounds the right thing in theory, and it is what one’s own heart dictates; but the difficulty is in reducing one’s aspirations to practice,” said Lord Merrian.

“No, not so far as your own tenants are concerned,” said uncompromising Patricia. “Look at Miss Fletcher’s houses! There you see it put into practice; and what a pleasure it is to go and see the people there!”

“But do you hear what the other Milltown landowners say of the Fletchers?” asked Lord Merrian.

Patricia looked up. “No; and I should not care

whatever I heard," she answered calmly. "Do we not know that the world always speaks against those who do the real right? We know for ourselves, at least I do, how good the Fletchers are—they are like angels—and what can it matter what others say?"

"You are an able advocate, Miss Kemball," Lord Merrian answered.

He did not know whether he was quite pleased to hear her praise of the Fletchers; but as she looked very beautiful when she spoke, and her eyes were honest and tender with her thoughts, and looked into his as if he was the cause and not merely the object, he made the best of her enthusiasm, and accepted it—transferred.

"Am I?" A smile broke over her face. "I should think I was if I could make any impression on you, Lord Merrian."

"You have," he said in a lowered voice; "a very deep impression."

"And your tenants will benefit? You will do as the Fletchers have done, and make them happy by better treatment than your neighbours give? You will, Lord Merrian?"

"Ah!" he said, and he sighed as he spoke; and sighed sincerely, believing in the phantoms that he

conjured up for himself, "if only I could! You do not know how we are fettered! Bailiffs and stewards, and leases and conditions, and above all, that self-adjustment of the labour market with which it is more than doubtful whether we ought to tamper—one's will is so strong, but one's power so weak!"

Patricia shook her head.

"No," she said earnestly. "No one's power is small—it is the will to use it that is wanting. Men in your position, Lord Merrian, can surely do as they like. No good can be done without trying—now can it? and does not trying always cost trouble? and doing what is right when the world does what is wrong—why! it must be hard and painful! But if one will not, and another will not, how can reforms come?"

"Yet it is not always possible, even with pain and trouble, to do the right which one would," he answered.

She looked at him, and tears seemed near her eyes.

"Do you know what you remind me of?" she asked.

"No; what?" he answered, looking down into her face.

"That young man in the Bible who went away

sorrowful because he had large possessions," said Patricia.

There was a pause. Her words had struck a little rudely on the secret sore of her companion's conscience, and he winced under them.

"Perhaps you are right," he said at length, and it cost him an effort to accept the blow so magnanimously; "but I think I know how my halting will could be strengthened." He said this almost as if to himself. "But am I really such a half-hearted, halting sinner in your eyes, Miss Kemball?" he asked appealingly.

"I was wrong perhaps, to say what I did," stammered Patricia.

Truth was all very well, but even truth need not be offensive. And had she not been a trifle priggish?

"I must say, dear, I think you are *very* bold," put in Dora, who had sauntered a little way ahead, knowing that her dark blue dress and chinchilla trimmings made a pretty bit for the foreground, and that the wind had blown a tiny lock of gold as a point of colour against the grey fur. She had been listening to this dull talk between the two, and wondering greatly in her own mind at Lord Merrian's odd choice of subject and Patricia's unabashed speech.

"No, you are quite right," Lord Merrian said ingenuously. "We may not like it, but a true, brave word does every one good. The precious balms, you know," smiling to Patricia.

"You are very good to take me so kindly," she said, looking down.

"That, however, is not answering my question ; do you think me so halting and half-hearted as you seemed to say ? "

She did not like being pressed, but she was too brave to deny the truth when put to it.

"I think you have less determination to do the right thing than you have clearness in seeing the wrong," she answered.

"Which comes to the same thing," said Lord Merrian.

She blushed.

"I suppose so," she replied. "But indeed I ought not to speak as I do," she then said in an eager, apologetic tone. "I sometimes feel as if I did know something of right and wrong, and then again as if I was the merest child, ignorant of everything."

"Not of everything," he said in a soft voice. "Do you never think you have a mission yourself ? "

"I? a mission? no, indeed!" she cried. "On the contrary, I feel a mere useless encumberer of the ground, an excrescence belonging to no one, and of no use anywhere."

Lord Merrian flushed like a girl. In general his pale, finely formed face showed but few changes of colour or expression. It was always a slightly sad face; statuesque, and cast in a tragic mould of the first degree; and he cultivated stillness; but now it became rudely coloured, while every part of it seemed to speak.

"You will find your mission some day perhaps," he said in a low voice. "The mission of strengthening a weak will and making a half-hearted life a whole one. Found any flowers yet, Miss Drummond?"

"No," said Dora, turning round with a pretty smile. "Have you?"

By this time they had wandered as far as the gate leading into the farm enclosure. A stout lady in black was standing by the furze-stack, talking to Mrs. Garth.

"Oh, there is Miss Fletcher!" cried Patricia.

Without thinking of what she was doing—if she had thought perhaps she would have done it all the same—she started off, running.

"My own dear!" she said, putting her arms round the kind, broad, handsome woman. "How glad I am to see you!"

"Why, where have you come from, child?" said Miss Fletcher laughing.

"Lord Merrian and Dora," answered Patricia, looking backwards.

Lord Merrian and Dora, yes; but some one else too; for riding down the lane, examining again, as so often before, the fields which were so soon to be his own, Mr. Hamley suddenly appeared on the scene, and joined the two just as they were passing through the gate.

"Heyday!" he said jocularly, but he was not quite pleased at what he saw; "are the skies a-going to fall? Miss Drummond out on her ten toes so far from home, and you too, my lord—morning, my lord—padding the hoof? Have you got any of the carriages hereabouts, Dora?"

"No," said Dora, with a graceful little greeting, by which she managed to convey to Mr. Hamley her exceeding pleasure at this chance meeting, and yet not cast in her lot with him visibly to Lord Merrian, who, she was aware, detested him. "We came out for a walk, Patricia and I, and met Lord Merrian in the lane."

"I am sure it is very good of his lordship to escort two such troublesome young ladies," said Mr. Hamley, still jocular. "Did you find them very bad to manage, my lord? I'll go bail you did for one!—but this little mouse, she gives no trouble to any one. That is why she is so useful at home, and why we are never going to part with her, hey Dora?"

"I have found both charming," Lord Merrian answered, coldly.

"Ah! and there's Miss Fletcher I see talking to Goody Garth. Why, all Milltown has made its comether at Long Field! I'll ride in and pay my compliments. Coming, my lord? After your lordship."

Mr. Hamley would have done better to have stayed outside the farm gate, for Mrs. Garth was just then in a burning state of indignation against him and his, which Catherine Fletcher was doing her best to soothe. She had known of her daughter's going suddenly from Abbey Holme to the Hollies, but not until last evening of the reason why the exchange had been made. She had thought the ladies and Alice had cooked it up among them, she said, partly to oblige Miss Fletcher, and partly because she supposed Alice had been bitten with a sudden

mania for the spit and the stewpan ; and it was only last evening that she had got the whole story out of the girl, founded on her unsuspecting question, " Well, Alice, and when did you see the old lady and Miss Drummond last ? "

She was furious ; as perhaps was only natural. A mother who had brought up her daughter in the ways of honesty and virtue, and whose temper was as hot as her pride was strong, was not likely to accept very quietly a method of dismissal which of itself was as damaging as any accusation. Indeed, more damaging ; inasmuch as it was an intangible injury—one that could not be met, and consequently one for which there was no redress and against it no protection. She talked of taking the law of Mr. Hamley ; of suing him for libel and damages ; of making him prove his words, and all the rest of it. She talked passionately, unreasonably, wildly, like an angry woman and an insulted mother ; and Miss Fletcher's wiser words at first fell unheeded. She was burning with too fierce a fire of wrath to be able to receive them. By degrees however, the clearer brain took the customary power over the excited one, and Mrs. Garth's passion began to moderate. She was quite calm now, discussing her barn-door stock by the furze-stack, when Patricia ran in, and im-

mediately after Dora Drummond and the young lord, followed by Mr. Hamley on his prancing bay.

And then the old fire burst forth again, and the outraged maternal instinct woke up to renewed fury. There was a stormy scene. Mrs. Garth lost her temper and said a few hard truths crudely; Mr. Hamley kept his dignity. The one demanded to know the reason why her daughter had been dismissed so summarily; the other refused to tell her.

"I have the right to know!" said Mrs. Garth.

"And I have the right to refuse," replied Mr. Hamley.

"Is there no law for the poor against the rich—no justice in heaven or earth?" cried the mother, flinging up her hands passionately.

Catherine Fletcher touched her on the shoulder.

"Dear Mrs. Garth," she said kindly, "you have no such heavy cause of complaint on the whole! Be reasonable. Your daughter passed at once from Abbey Holme to our house, and I do not think any one would consider that a degradation. She has not suffered, and will not, if you do not yourself noise the story abroad. Then indeed she will."

"Oh! passed to you, did she?" said Mr. Hamley.

"I never heard of that. Pray, does Mrs. Hamley know?"

"Not that I am aware of," said Catherine quietly.

"You engaged her without a character?"

"Surely! I knew her too well to need one."

"Peculiar conduct!" sneered Mr. Hamley. "Consistent with your school, I suppose?"

"With the school of justice, and doing as I would be done by, Mr. Hamley?—I hope so," was her answer.

"I appeal to you two young ladies—to you, Miss Drummond—had you any complaint against my girl?" cried Mrs. Garth excitedly.

Dora lifted up her blue eyes.

"I know nothing about it," she said quietly.

"Yet she was your maid, miss."

"But Mr. and Mrs. Hamley are the master and mistress," said dear Dora, with the sweetest little air of loving submission imaginable. "It is not my place to inquire into the reason of anything they choose to do: still less to object. They sent Alice away, and as they did not tell me why, it would have been very unbecoming in me to ask."

"That is right," said Mr. Hamley approvingly. "If all ladies were as amenable as Miss Drummond,

things would progress a vast sight better than they do now."

"Did you know nothing, miss?" Mrs. Garth continued, speaking to Patricia.

"No, nothing," she answered with girlish tenderness. "I only saw Alice in trouble, and I told her to go down to the Hollies."

"You told her, did you?" repeated Mr. Hamley fiercely. Then he looked at Lord Merrian and checked himself. "You did right, my dear," he said with an effort. He thought it would never do to humiliate his wife's niece in the sight of the future Earl of Dovedale; "but you should have consulted your aunt before you took such a step. Good impulses, I make no doubt; but good impulses have to be ridden with the curb, not given their head; what say you, my lord?"

"I do not understand what all this discussion is about," Lord Merrian replied, and looked at Patricia.

"I will tell you when we go away," said Dora confidentially, as if she was speaking to her chin-chilla muff. "And do let us go, Lord Merrian!—this mad woman is dreadful!"

Doubtless she was. A farm-house Constance, with her cotton gown bearing the stain of poverty,

the soil of service, is of no interest to refined folk who yet would probably weep quite genuine tears at the sorrows of a stage Constance simulating royal grief cleverly. Royal grief is a respectable kind of passion, and royal madness has its especial power of pathos ; but a rude and homely woman of the people pouring out her sorrows and her wrongs in unclassic English—refined folk see no pathos there, and only think “how dreadful !”

“I am in a maze,” said Lord Merrian ; “pray enlighten me.” And he and Dora moved towards the gate.

Then the disintegration of the close-set group began. Mr. Hamley rode after Dora, not caring to let her linger alone with my lord, saying as his parting shot : “I am sorry to see you in such a taking, Mrs. Garth, at what was a duty—a disagreeable but meritorious duty—on my part ;” Miss Fletcher shaking hands and giving a few last words of comfort ; and Patricia shaking hands too, and adding her fresh young sympathy to her friend’s.

“Don’t grieve so much, dear Mrs. Garth,” she said kindly. “No one thinks a word about Alice to her disfavour—no one can ; and she is better off where she is !”

Which Mrs. Garth in her own heart knew to be true.

Lord Merrian watched Patricia's leave-taking with the farmer's wife. He felt a certain odd distaste mingled with admiration for her friendly action.

"She is gloriously thorough," he said to himself; "but—I wonder if I should like it in my wife! Surely things can be carried too far, and we ought to draw the line somewhere. Ladies and common women are not equals!"

When they reached home Patricia had more to bear from her aunt than Mr. Hamley's mild expostulation at the farm. She was really as angry as Mrs. Garth had been; but she expressed herself in better English, and she did not gesticulate so much.

"That girl is always doing something to irritate and upset me!" she said to Dora peevishly. "Just now, when I was so well and cheerful, to be annoyed like this!"

And Dora purred a soothing assent; by no means seeking to defend or justify Patricia, by which she would have merely made Mrs. Hamley angrier than before, to the inclusion of herself in the roll-call of the disgraced. But when the fitting moment came

she led the conversation on to Lord Merrian ; telling Mrs. Hamley of the attention he had paid Patricia to-day ; and how she was sure he liked her ; and, with a smile dimpling her fair face and her blue eyes watching keenly, what a delightful thing it would be if he really did take a fancy to her and make her Lady Merrian !

The ruse succeeded ; but only partially ; for even while Dora spoke Mrs. Hamley caught herself wondering why Patricia had shown such friendliness for Alice, who was not *her* maid ? Why indeed ? Had she compunctions ? It seemed like it ; and the thought shook the poor lady, heart and brain. She went on to reflect however, that, whether Alice was innocent or not, Catherine Fletcher had acted with an unpardonable want of ladylike feeling in taking a servant discharged by her without a character ; and " I will tell her of it," said Mrs. Hamley, stiffening her back to the brunt. She was of the nature of those who must have a scapegoat when things go wrong ; and it not being quite politic, with the Quest in view, to snub Patricia over much, she turned against Catherine Fletcher who could bear it.

So far Dora dealt kindly by her friend, and stood between her and her aunt's displeasure. She was an

artful little woman and abominably untruthful; but she was kind-hearted, and always ready to scheme and manœuvre to save Patricia as well as herself —provided she did not burn her own fingers in the fire, or suffer in any way by her advocacy.

CHAPTER XIV.

PASSING IT ON.

THE wolves were pressing round Cragfoot, and Sydney's more expensive enjoyments were fain to be flung one after the other as successive sacrifices wherewith to stave off their worst attacks. When debts of honour—losses on the turf and the like—swallowed up all the available cash, and money was wanting for interest and house-bills, it was only to be expected that the younger man should share in the general discomfort, and be asked to contribute his tale of surrenders with the rest. But this was just what he would not do. He was one of those men to whom happiness consists in personal pleasure, and without money he saw no good in living.

Life at this time was thorny for Sydney Lowe. He was as passionately in love with Dora as he could be with any one ; but he was most of all in love with himself. And of the two he found it harder to give

up his own pleasure than her. Since things had taken their present untoward turn he bitterly repented his rash step, and longed, as the weak and wilful do, to be able to unravel what he had so thoughtlessly knit up, to destroy what he had so firmly built. It was to no good however, that he fumed and fretted. Dora was his wife by the laws of both Church and State ; and neither his father's ruin nor Mr. Hamley's close-fistedness could alter that fact, undo that tie.

And now, to make matters worse, there had sprung up a certain coolness between himself and his wife which robbed him of all the good of his folly. It made his heart beat with an odd exultant pride when he reflected that this pretty creature, the pride of Mr. Hamley's life, watched and guarded and desired and coveted at all points, had laughed with him at the close defence-work set about her, and that he had carried her off out of their hands and from under their very eyes. But over this exultant pride of late had come a kind of consciousness that something was amiss, and that Dora was not as she had been.

There had been no meeting between them since the dinner party at the Quest, and already the lengthening days had brightened into spring. There

were no means of communicating with her against her will, and he could not make their relations public, even for the gain of making them open and continuous, at the cost of ruin ; which would be the price he should have to pay. She was growing mysterious too ; hinting at better arrangements if they had never met at St. Pancras ; and writing melancholy little notes which distracted him on more accounts than one, and set him thinking of many things. He had not the slightest suspicion that she was alluding to herself in these potential better arrangements, had they never repeated those fatal words behind the caryatides. He was too young to be doubtful of his own ability to keep the woman

- he had won ; that kind of mistrust comes only with experience ; and though jealous he had no self-diffidence. No, she meant for him, not for herself ; of that he was quite sure ; and, judging of her feeling by his own knowledge, she meant Julia Manley.

Julia Manley ! Bad as the exchange would be, woman for woman, how heartily he wished, now that his father's impecuniosity was pressing personally on him, that he could make it ; how sorrowfully he was obliged to confess that, as Colonel Lowe had said, money does indeed make the homeliest visage

beautiful, while the want of it leaves Venus herself undesirable.

Still, with all these drawbacks, he wanted to see Dora again. He yearned for the old fascination of her words and ways and looks, and wandered about the Abbey Holme grounds at midnight, to the imminent risk of being taken for a burglar by the gardeners when they went to look after their stoves, or for a poacher by the keepers watching the preserves.

But more than for the pleasure of looking into her pretty eyes and hearing her sweet voice, being coaxed while scolded and petted while rebuked, he longed to see her for a graver reason. He had been scheming something in that busy brain of his, and he had decided that Dora should help him. So it came about that she too, wishing to keep him in good humour, fearing lest he might divine her thoughts respecting Lord Merrian, met him as usual one night in the garden, and heard his scheme.

They were sitting in the little summer-house where they had so often sat before, he holding her in his arms lovingly while he whispered his grand idea into her ear. Apparently it was one that distressed her greatly ; for she shrunk and cried, and said she could not and she would not, and now tried

indignant refusal, now pathetic appeal, and now coaxing persuasion, to make him alter his determination of implicating her.

Sydney was immovable. To all her beseechings he answered only in the one strain: "You are so clever, you will not be found out; and even if you are you will not be punished. Hold your tongue and do as I tell you, and no harm can come to you."

"You are the most cruel wretch I ever saw," at last said Dora with energy; "and I hate you!"

Sydney took her by the wrists, twisted her round, and looked into her face.

"If I thought that I would throw everything to the winds to-morrow!" he cried fiercely. "You are my wife, and your place is with me; and if I have to commit a crime, I would rather kill you than be put in prison for bigamy!"

"You will be put in prison for forgery, which is worse," said Dora.

"If you betray me, yes," he answered, looking down into her face intently. "If you do betray me however, remember you will go to prison too as an accomplice, and have the pleasant name of a forger's wife pinned to your back for life."

"Sydney, I believe you are a fiend," said Dora passionately. "You frighten me sometimes, I

declare you do, with your violence and wickedness."

"Come, Dody, this is nonsense," said Sydney, suddenly changing his rough manner to one of caressing softness. "Our lives are one now and we have to stand or fall together. Money I must have, and mean to have, and you can get it for me, and shall get it for me, else you will repent it," he added, the fierce old intonation ringing in his words; for his moods were as changeable as a sick child's, and he was not to be counted on for stability in anything—save self-indulgence.

"I perfectly dread the sound of your voice," Dora said peevishly. "You are getting associated in my mind with everything that is painful and horrid. At one time it was the joy of my life, my only happiness, to meet you like this; now we never see each other but you quarrel with me, or ask me to do something disgraceful for you. First I have to get you ten pounds, and poor Alice is turned away on suspicion of having taken it, and I am sure Patricia is suspected too; and now I have to get you money on a forged cheque! Where will you end, Sydney?"

"On the gallows perhaps," said Sydney lightly.

"There is many a true word spoken in jest; and

if you go on like this you will end on the gallows," said Dora viciously.

There was no good to be had however, in quarrelling. Sydney was determined; and he had more resolution of the active kind than Dora. In a real contest between them she would inevitably give way; and before they parted she had given way, accepting, after a short pause of rapid consideration, a piece of paper whereon was written an order to the local banker to pay to bearer the sum of £100—signed "Jabez Hamley."

"Mind, Dora, gold!" were Sydney's last words. "Gold cannot be traced; notes can."

The next day was a fine, bright spring day, but Mrs. Hamley kept the house. She had not been well for these last few weeks, and the spring seemed to find out her weak places. She looked more pinched and worn than usual, and she was in a depressed state generally. But she would not have a doctor, and was annoyed if any one seemed to think she was failing. She complained a good deal to Dora of her disappointment in Patricia, and to Patricia herself had always a headache. Dora was, of course, sympathetic and soothing, and agreed with her in her low estimate of "poor Patricia," and said she was certainly an infliction; but never-

theless she had always her little word of kindness to add as the sweetener, and more than once brought Mrs. Hamley into a favourable state of mind out of one cankered and unfavourable.

As Mrs. Hamley was not going to drive to-day, Dora proposed to take Patricia in the pony-carriage which Mr. Hamley had given to her on her last birthday; a pretty little blue Victoria, with two mouse-coloured ponies with blue and silver harness, and a pyramid of bells topped with blue tufts hung about the neck-gear.

For their personal attendant they had the page; at Dora's request. She told Mrs. Hamley she did not like to take one of the men out of the house while she was in it—it scarcely looked respectful. “Dora has such nice feeling!” said the lady, relating the anecdote to her husband. And, having permission to take Collins, she put a handful of apples into her beadwork carriage-basket for him. She wanted to talk to Patricia, and she knew that if the lad was eating apples at the back he could not hear what was being said in low voices in the front. She could scarcely have bribed a man so innocently; so perhaps her nice feelings, on which Mrs. Hamley had expatiated, would have left a rather different residuum had they been analyzed.

To the boy of course the condescension, kindness, thoughtfulness of the gift were immeasurable; and from that day forward he was her devoted adherent who would have gone to the stake for her had there been the need. If the true motive of all ladies' smiles was made known, how many loyal knights would be left?

As they got into the little pony-carriage, with the butler and footmen at the door, and Mrs. Hamley looking at them from the side-window of the ante-room, it was almost like a royal departure; and when they drove off down the avenue even the dull old butler thought they made a pretty turn out—for young ladies not of the real aristocracy—and Mrs. Hamley was quite proud of them. Both the girls looked back and waved their hands to her as they drove away; but it was Dora who waved hers first. Simply because the other did not know that her aunt was there. But the little incident made the lady sigh, and wish that her niece had been as satisfactory as her husband's cousin.

Then they drove through the gates and into the road, and presently Dora, turning round, said graciously to the boy, "Here, Collins, here are some apples for you. I like to please children, and

Collins is really only a child!" she added apologetically to Patricia, who needed no apology for an action that was to her mind full of grace and sweetest womanliness.

It was but a trifling circumstance; but it set the measure in the girl's mind, and disposed her to more than her usual admiration for her graceful, fascinating friend—the model ever held before her as the supreme excellence to resemble which she ought to devote all her energies.

Presently Dora, looking into her face, said tenderly, "I don't think you are quite well, dear, are you?"

"Yes, quite," answered Patricia. "What makes you think I am not?"

"You are so much more depressed than you used to be. You seem to be so unhappy!"

"So I am," said Patricia, tears coming up into her eyes. "I am more unhappy than at one time I thought it was possible for me to be. When I was quite young I felt as if I could not be unhappy, as if I must be bright and brave and cheerful!"

"But what is there to make you so unhappy?" asked Dora.

"Knowing what I do, how can I be anything else?" she answered.

"About me?"

"Why, yes."

"Why should you let that disturb you so much?" said Dora quietly. "You do not suffer by it if I am in a scrape."

"Is that your idea of life, Dora? Do you think one does not suffer when the person one loves is in trouble?" asked Patricia quickly. "It is worse than if it was one's self."

Dora made her favourite little grimace. "I don't think so," she said. "And it is all very well for those who are not implicated to say so; but we who have to bear the reality know how light the mere sympathetic reflection is!"

"Ah, Dora, it is not light!" Patricia cried, a world of pathos in her voice.

"I think it is," persisted the other. "Look here now, Patricia. You say you love me, and feel for me, and all that, and make yourself miserable on my account; but just see what you do—you make things ten times worse for me by fretting and looking as if you were always sulky, or so miserable no one knows what to do with you. I have to be courageous and cheerful, I who really suffer; and you who have nothing to do with it, have given way, I must say, both childishly and selfishly."

"I do not want to be either, Dora; but indeed, the knowledge that you are living in all this deception has nearly broken my heart," said Patricia as humbly as earnestly.

"Patricia, be reasonable," remonstrated Dora. "What earthly good do you get by breaking your heart, as you call it, except spoiling your complexion and making everybody talk and suspect something? Grant that I have been wrong, foolish, stupid—anything you like—what is done cannot be undone; and my only wisdom now is to make the best of it."

"Making the best of it would be to tell," said Patricia.

"Well, let us see what that would do for me," said Dora, quite calmly. "I should, first of all, be turned out of the house; the Hamleys would not give me sixpence, perhaps not my clothes; Sydney would be discarded by his father, who is moreover ruined; he would have no money, and he knows nothing by way of a profession by which to earn a loaf of bread. Now, what could we do?"

"You would not starve, Dora; you can teach. If I were in your place I would do anything rather than live in falsehood."

"I cannot teach; I never have taught; I have

no connection ; and pupils do not come for the mere saying you are ready to have them."

"But other people get on by their own exertions; why not you ?" said Patricia.

"But I should hate teaching, for I hate children," said Dora.

"Dora, don't !" cried Patricia, who loved them.

"Well, dear, I will tell stories and make up a face as girls do, if you like that better, and say that I adore the dear little wretches," said Dora coolly. "I thought you liked truth."

"So I do ; but I like the truth to be good and beautiful," Patricia answered.

"Ah, you see I am neither moral nor sentimental, Patricia ! I know nothing of beautiful truth or ugly truth. I know only of an inconvenient discovery, and the wisdom of keeping one's own counsel."

"Well, we are different !" sighed Patricia. "I could not act as you are acting now to save my life. And I feel that I am sinning against my own conscience to consent to it, even as I do."

Dora smiled to herself. She thought the sin against her conscience and her consent to evil-doing would be greater before this drive was over.

"Your conscience !" she said, flicking her ponies

with an off-hand air. "I have always noticed that when people want to do anything particularly bad, like betrayal or selfishness, they talk of their conscience. I don't pretend to be very truthful or very conscientious, or very anything that is grand; but I think I would stand by a friend, such as I am and have been from the first to you—ask Mrs. Hamley if I am or not!—to the very death. And if I knew of her being in such a dreadful scrape as I am, I would not talk of my conscience, or doubt whether I ought to betray her or not, but I would help her to the very utmost of my power."

"You know I would not betray you, Dora, and you know that I cannot help you," said Patricia.

"I am by no means sure of the first, and you can do the last," Dora answered. "You can help me very much—even to-day—if you chose."

Patricia shrunk back.

"I? no!" she said.

"Oh, don't be alarmed," laughed Dora with a certain mockery in her manner; "I am not going to ask you to hurt that precious conscience of yours! I only want a cheque changed, that is all."

"I will do that of course, Dora. But why cannot you do it yourself?"

"You inquisitive little puss!" she laughed.

"Well, I will tell you why. I have some money in the bank, and I want to draw it out for poor Syd. He is so dreadfully hard up, poor boy, and I want to help him. You know he is my husband, Patricia, and it is my duty," with a sorrowfully subdued and loyal air.

"And you do not want the Hamleys to know that you have taken it out?"

"Of course not—not for worlds. I should be ruined indeed if they knew! Syd will put it back again some day, and it will never be found out if you take the cheque. Of course it would if *I* did."

The mysteries of banking were by no means clear to Patricia; and she accepted Dora's reasoning.

"I am sorry you have to give the money," she said.

"But it is my duty, is it not?" said Dora sweetly.

Patricia hesitated for a moment.

"Yes," she then said; "it is."

Dora gave a great sigh of relief; then she smiled pleasantly.

"I must say this, Patricia, you are a most good-natured girl," she said, looking into her face prettily. "I am going to turn down the London road now, and we will pass through Milltown on

our way home. I will stop at Martin's; I want some muslin; and you can walk into the bank and get the cheque changed. It is for a hundred pounds, and you must bring it all in gold."

"Very well," said Patricia.

"And you will be sure, dear, not to tell?"

"The Hamleys? Of course not."

"Not if they ask you? Suppose they get any suspicion of it, you will never betray me?"

"Certainly not," was Patricia's answer.

"You swear?" with strange earnestness.

"Yes, I swear."

"Join hands on it!" said Dora.

And Patricia took the little well-gloved hand in hers and pressed it.

"You may trust me, dear," she said. "What I promise I hope I always perform."

After this the conversation turned, and Dora seemed as if she could not show enough tenderness and sweetness to her friend. She was everything that was most charming—playful, grave, affectionate, earnest; full of the freshest sympathy for Patricia's troubles with her aunt and eager to point out where and how she could mend her position; she spoke respectfully of the Fletchers, with whom there had been a break on account of Alice Garth,

much to Patricia's pain; with a matronly appreciation of Lord Merrian; tenderly of the poor; with wonder and regret at the whole mystery of Alice Garth. There was not the slightest fibre in the swansdown nature of her that curled the wrong way, and the remainder of the drive was simply what she intended it to be, enchantment. She was a Circe in her way; and blinded if she did not brutalise her lovers.

But to do her justice, all the time she felt the deepest hatred for Sydney who was forcing her to this sorry part, and a kind of reverential pity for the credulous affection of the girl on whose loyalty she was trading; while disagreeable gushes of self-accusation forced themselves in between her shallower thoughts like bitter waters welling up through surface pools. But self-accusation was not much in her line; and as a rule she was more inclined to throw the blame of her own wrong-doing on others than accept it for herself.

At last they reached Milltown, and Dora drew up at Martin's. Collins jumped out to the ponies' heads.

"Will you go now, dear?" Dora said to Patricia, putting a folded piece of paper into her hand.

"Yes; what am I to do?"

"Just hand that across the counter as it is. You need not open it. The man will say, 'How will you have it?' and you will answer 'Gold.' Don't be persuaded into notes. It must be gold."

"Very well," said Patricia, and went off on her errand.

In due time she returned. She had a small canvas bag in her hand, containing a hundred sovereigns, bright and fresh. Never was a felony committed with so much ease, so little doubt, so little delay. Sydney had reason to be proud of his wife's ability and Dora of her own power. Poor Patricia was the sacrifice on to whom they bound the burden of the sin; a burden she bore so innocently, with such simple unconsciousness of its true meaning, such a faithful desire only to do what was right and kind and loving! But so it ever is in this strange life of ours. We are punished more for our virtues than our vices; and those of us who succeed best in our generation are for the most part those who sin beyond the average, but with more than the average craft and cleverness.

The next month passed like wedding-bells. Every one was in good humour, consequently every one was delightful. Sydney, freed from his immediate embarrassments and set afloat for a time,

was again dear Dora's devoted lover, and their relations were of the most harmonious kind ; for she too, disillusioned as to the possibility of the great prize had things been different, thought Sydney Lowe better than no one, and made herself happy in her consciousness of power and a secret.

Lord Merrian came frequently to Abbey Holme ; but he let it be seen that he came for Patricia, and no one could doubt that he was "paying her attention." Apparently Lord and Lady Dovedale were not averse to their son's choice, for the two girls were as often at the Quest as Lord Merrian was at Abbey Holme ; and the countess took especial notice of Miss Kemball, and sought to train and draw her out in every possible direction. She was not the girl she would have chosen ; but she knew her son, and—knowing him—adopted the silken and not the driving rein, taking care never to oppose him when she wished to guide. If Patricia Kemball was richly dowered she would put up with her unformed habits for a while, trusting to her own future power of perfect modelling. So she cultivated Lord Merrian's Joan of Arc assiduously, and by the look of things she was pleased at the result of her studies. On her side, though Patricia never liked the countess as she liked Miss Fletcher, and never

got to feel really at home with her, she was too affectionate and responsive not to open her heart when so graciously entreated ; and as she suspected nothing beyond what she saw, and showed that she did not, she was at least unconscious if not always unembarrassed.

The Hamleys watched this growing affair with intense satisfaction. As Lady Merrian, Patricia's greatest faults would become shining virtues and every defect a splendid jewel. Her aunt would feel then that she had been bountifully repaid for all her care, her endeavours, her annoyances, her headaches ; and Mr. Hamley would bow down to her as one of the divinities by whom he had been borne upward. He was prepared to give her a really magnificent portion ; one quite up to the mark set by the earl and countess ; and he would never grudge the outlay, he said. It would be money well laid out, he felt, and he did not care how soon he had to write the cheque.

So the sunny days of May came in with hope and serenity all round ; save perhaps to Patricia herself. She did not feel quite so joyous as the rest, and she missed the Fletchers. For them, they looked on a little sadly ; but they did not discuss the present state of affairs even between themselves.

All that Henry Fletcher said, one day when he had seen the three young people together, was, "I question if our Patricia will be perfectly happy in that sphere; and I doubt if Lord Merrian is strong or true enough for her!"

END OF VOL. II.

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